

Online experiences of socially disadvantaged children and young people in Portugal

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Abstract: This article examines the conditions of internet access and uses by children and young people from socially disadvantaged environments in Portugal. Adapting the EU Kids Online questionnaire, a sample of 279 participants (9 to 16 years old) in an intervention program on digital inclusion was interviewed in order to analyze their online experiences, bearing in mind the EU Kids Online results and the wider debate on digital inclusion. This issue was examined at two levels: access, and practices and uses. Although economic deprivation, parents' low educational attainment (affecting also family support) and children's age and gender seem to matter in terms of access, reported uses were analogous to the average Portuguese and EU Kids Online data. However, with these children apparently being more oriented towards entertainment and having less informational skills, it is questionable if policies that merely assure access are entirely sufficient. Nevertheless, one cannot say straightforwardly that 'social exclusion' equates 'digital exclusion'.

Keywords: internet uses, digital inclusion, socially disadvantaged, children and young people, Portugal

1 – Introduction

Most available research on internet uses by children and young people, especially quantitative research with a national or transnational scope, is typically concerned with the general representation of a given population, not having in mind specific groups which might stand out from the average population as a result of particular social traits. This is the case of minority groups such as migrant, socially disadvantaged or deprived children, about whom extensive research is lacking.

There are a few exceptions to this rule, one being the latest EU Kids Online survey, which located a significant group of socially disadvantaged children across 25 countries, making it possible "to pinpoint educational/economic and social disadvantages that are easily lost in smaller or national studies" (Livingstone, Görzig, and Ólafsson, 2011, p. 2). However, although this cross-national survey tackled social diversity and opened up a door to look at socially disadvantaged children and online risks in Europe, its focus was not on this specific subject and therefore particular issues were not fully addressed. Under the scope of the international project *Digital Inclusion and Participation*¹ we

¹ Project funded by the UTAustin|Portugal Program and was focused on the digital uses (or non-uses) of minority groups such as migrants, the elderly, and deprived children.

decided to further explore and contextualize these findings working on the adaptation of the EU Kids Online questionnaire to a sample of young people living in socially deprived conditions in Portugal.

This article presents results of a sample of children and young people (9- to 16-year-olds) from disenfranchised social environments who were asked about their online activities. The interviews occurred in public places: the Digital Inclusion Centers related to a specific institutional program called *Escolhas* (meaning “choices”) and located in deprived neighborhoods. The group of questions covered access, specific uses and skills, the mediating role of other people (namely parents/relatives, peers, and teachers) as well as perceptions and experiences regarding online safety and risks. However, the article will mainly analyze questions related to access, skills and particular internet uses, since it is our purpose to explore the issue of digital inclusion/exclusion among this particular group of children.

Most common literature and research regarding the issue of digital divide tend to equate ‘digital exclusion’ with ‘social exclusion’, considering that the former is an unavoidable consequence of the latter. However, as we intend to discuss in this article, in specific populations, such as the one we have studied, the relation between cultural and economic resources and digital experiences seems to be more complex than one would expect. While economic deprivation may have an impact on children’s internet access and corresponding family support, actual uses may not differ that much from the overall population. We intend to discuss to what extent this is true.

The article starts by briefly reviewing the literature on the relation between social inequalities and media experiences and by providing a brief contextualization of the case we are going to analyze, a particular group of deprived children in Portugal. The methodological options and a description of the sample allow us to anticipate the presentation of the findings at two levels: the level of access, examining the conditions concerning children’s internet access, namely the contexts where it takes place and the influence that family resources and internet access have on children; and the level of uses and practices, examining the children’s reported online activities and digital skills. In both cases it includes a comparative perspective with EU Kids Online data. These findings open up the discussion on the issue of digital and social inclusion and its relationship towards particular social contexts and public policies.

2 – Socially disadvantaged children and young people and their media experiences

In contemporary societies, besides the relative social invisibility of children as a social group, information and research on the most vulnerable groups of children are by and large missing, namely about children living in poverty or in alternative care, from ethnic minorities or migrant populations, thus ignoring the children’s life experiences that do not fit the mainstream depiction of what stands for “being a child”. Alongside the demographic decrease in birth rates in most European countries, the increasing state of children’s poverty has been pointed out as another emerging social trend since the beginning of the 1990’s (Qvortrup, 1994, p. xii). These trends have been confirmed by recent data: In 2009, even before the current economic crisis, one in five children in the EU were at risk of poverty – approximately 20 million children (Eurostat, 2010).

There are many ways of defining poverty, ranging from absolute or relative definitions (based on income) to indicators of social inequality. As far as children are concerned, a move to indicators regarding child well-being has been recognized as particularly relevant for measuring their social inclusion (Bradshaw, 2007). Among these indicators are those related to material, educational and subjective well-being, as noticed in recent UNICEF reports (UNICEF, 2007, 2010). According to this

perspective, if children cannot function as ‘normal’ society members because they do not have access to material goods that others deem as necessary, this indicator of deprivation is particularly relevant (Montgomery, 2009, p. 166). Moreover, for socially disadvantaged children and young people, poverty should not be regarded only by scarcity of material and/or educational resources: It is also an internal construction of a self that makes certain choices seem unimaginable – from reading a library book in their leisure times to considering an ambitious career in their future. For this reason, the problem of social inequalities, which explains most of the arguments around digital divide, should not be reduced to economic factors but also include other resources and social conditions (from education to ethnicity) and the complex interaction between them.

This is why we have witnessed, in recent years, a move from “digital divide” towards one on “digital inequalities” (DiMaggio et al., 2004; Halford and Savage, 2010; Hargittai, 2008). These inequalities reflect distinct skills, motivations and appropriations of digital media, which, in turn, may be noticeable in the way particular “technological dispositions” and “technological capital” are built on (Rojas et al., 2012). Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and social and cultural capitals (Bourdieu, 1979, 1993) are particularly productive in this case of digital inclusion/exclusion, taking the debate about poverty away from mere economics and back to issues of inequality and social reproduction, making visible the lack of cultural and social capitals. As a system of enduring dispositions, the habitus is helpful in explaining how people tend to act in a certain way and see the world through a particular recurring frame (Bourdieu, 1979, pp. 190–191).

Under this perspective, considering the way distinct family capitals might interact and how particular dispositions toward technology may be formed, one should become aware of the fact that the internet represents “not a new opportunity but potentially a new danger, a new form of difference and exclusion” (Ridge, 2007, p. 174). This claim is based on deprived children’s reports on their own experiences of living with low income across a range of European countries. Accordingly, the author notes that “as children’s social lives are increasingly developed, explored and negotiated in the world of virtual time and space, new sites of social exclusion are emerging”, namely through “unsustainable consumption demands of high-tech accessories” (Ridge, 2007, p. 174). Moreover, even if disadvantaged children gain more internet access, they may remain relatively disadvantaged both in terms of the quality of internet access they enjoy and because one form of this disadvantage is generally correlated with others, namely parents’ available time, parental education and expertise, educational values at home, quiet places to study and so forth (Livingstone, 2009).

Based on her ethnographic research among children in the US, Ellen Seiter (2005) argues that, far from leveling class differences, the internet has deepened social divisions along the lines of class, race and ethnicity, both within and between countries. Middle-class children are more likely not only to have better quality computers and software, but also to have more informed support in using them from parents and other adults. They also have greater access to social networks which will provide them with a sense of motivation and purpose in using such technology in the first place. By contrast, poorer children simply have less access to cultural goods and services: “They live not just in different social worlds, but in different media worlds as well” (Buckingham, 2006, p. 84).

Several authors have suggested that we should regard these distinct media worlds according to different levels of digital inclusion and participation. Eszter Hargittai (2002), for instance, talks about two levels of digital divide in order to understand one’s relation with the internet. At a first level, digital divide means having access to digital technologies, considering ownership and use; whereas at a second level, digital divide is related to the user profiles, assuming that more advanced

users will develop more functional rather than entertainment-oriented profiles. This last idea is in line with current assessments regarding a digital divide. The question of access, central to the first approaches on a “digital gap” between populations (van Dijk, 2006) has been replaced by a broader concern with uses, thus addressing the issue of what one does with available technologies. While the complexity of internet use cannot be properly taken in hand by an oversimplified debate around “haves” and “have-nots” (Hargittai, 2008), it is also considered that providing mere access “does not confer equal advantages to the users of ICT [...] and that we need to focus our attention on questions of practice” (Halford and Savage, 2010, p. 939). This is precisely what some authors have remarked (Goldman et al., 2008; Hargittai and Hinnant, 2008), making it visible that “exposure to experiences that increase participatory culture and digital literacy are unequally available to individuals regardless of their access to media” (Hargittai and Walejko, 2008, p. 241). Furthermore, in the case of children and youth, it is known that the amount and diversity of online activities and skills tend to increase with age, in some sort of “ladder of opportunities” that is climbed from basic uses at younger age to broader and more sophisticated uses in adolescence (Livingstone and Helsper, 2007).

As we will see, in populations such as deprived children and young people, the relation between these levels of digital divide may be more complex than one would expect. If economic deprivation may impact in an obvious way on access and family support, actual uses may not differ that much from the overall group. In fact, although most common sociological variables continue to be important predictors of access to technology and are helpful for explaining different patterns and levels of internet use (Peter and Valkenburg, 2006; Livingstone and Helsper, 2007), its apparent effect may not be as obvious as it was considered above. This suggests that we need to rethink the explanations that deal not only with access to the internet but also, and foremost, with the complexities under which online uses occur.

3 – The Portuguese social context and the *Escolhas* program

Throughout the last 50 years, Portugal has undergone a modernization process at several levels by means of large transformations in its economy and social structure with an impact on its cultural patterns and lifestyles, all having considerable influence on children’s and young people’s experiences. Besides the collapse in the mid-1970s of a totalitarian regime that lasted more than 40 years, and the political democratization that followed, the array of changes is both vast and diversified: from economic development to educational expansion (with substantial discrepancies between the younger generations and their parents); from technology and science investments to a general reconfiguration of the social structure; from industrial and services growth (and resulting agricultural decline) to urban intensification; from new demographic patterns, with a decrease in birth rates – one of the most accentuated in Europe – and an increase of recomposed families, to the acknowledgment of equal rights and opportunities for women. All these features suggest how Portugal has moved from a (practically) “closed” society to a (generally) “open” one. Qualitative consequences of these transformations are probably more significant than their quantitative ones, measured in terms of their impact on economic and social structure.

In many ways, Portugal has become more similar to other European countries, especially after entering the European Union (EU) in 1986. However, despite all these enormous transformations and an obvious development, Portuguese society still has to carry the negative weight of some of the

above structural features: In the EU, Portugal still has one of the lowest levels of productivity² and educational achievement among the adult population while it presents one of the highest levels of relative poverty³ and social inequality on the GINI index. One may say, in other words, that Portugal remains to some extent in an in-between position: Although it has evident features of most modern countries, it still reproduces some of its pre-modern patterns of development, thus remaining paradoxically in a dual position (Cardoso et al., 2005; de Almeida, Costa, and Machado, 1994, 2006; Machado and Costa, 1998).

As for lifestyle changes, one could mention the late arrival, in the 1990s, of consumption patterns compared to other contemporary societies, which have had an increasing expression within leisure cultures: changes in the TV offert with the emergence of a multiplicity of entertainment-oriented commercial channels; an explosion of shopping centers attracting family outings; the adornment of the households with individualized technology, including digital technologies oriented at entertainment, communication and information (TV, DVD players, gaming consoles, PCs and laptops, digital cameras, etc.); and a plethora of many other goods. These “postmodern” scenarios contrast with relatively high levels of school failure and the withdrawal from school among young generations, or the low levels of informational literacy amongst adult generations, which are mostly explained by lower levels of general literacy (de Almeida and Vieira, 2006).

In recent years, public policies have tried to change this educational scenario, investing both in adults and children around outreach programs such as *Novas Oportunidades* [New Opportunities]. They target adults with low school attainment, upgrade school equipments (e.g., broadband access, digital boards) while integrating ICT in the curricula, and stimulate the industries to produce and sell low-cost laptops to students since the early years of schooling (programs *E-Escolas* and *E-Escolinhas*) in a program that also involved the internet service providers.

This policy had a huge social impact, confirming that the internet, unlike TV and other mass media, tends to be perceived as an inherent educational medium (de Almeida, Alves, and Delicado, 2011; Nakamura in Clark et al., 2005). In fact, a large proportion of parents with low levels of income and education showed the desire to provide their children with these modern resources, contrasting this opportunity with the poor conditions they had experienced in their childhood. In a large number of families, *Magalhães* (a laptop similar to INTEL Classmate, especially designed for children aged between 6 and 11 years) was the first computer to enter the household, and it was even considered as an opportunity for all family members. This positive parental reaction led to a democratization of laptop ownership among children: By the end of 2010, related to the programs *E-Escola* and *E-Escolinha*, more than 1.6 million laptops had already been distributed among students, including 400,000 *Magalhães*.

Combining social and educational purposes, *Escolhas* is a nationwide program aiming to promote social inclusion of children and young people (6- to 24-year-olds) from the most vulnerable socio-economic contexts, particularly descendants of immigrants and ethnic minorities. Digital inclusion is one of its five priority areas of intervention, interplaying in many ways with the others: school education, vocational training, entrepreneurship, community participation and citizenship. In the field since 2001, its 132 centers are mostly placed in the metropolitan areas of Lisbon and Oporto, created by local NGOs and working in vulnerable contexts, these being social housing, old buildings in the city center or slums in the suburbs. Each center is equipped with a minimum package of six

² According to Eurostat (2003), Portuguese productivity in 2003 was only 58.9 % per working hour of each worker, while in most European countries it was more than 100 %. See Cardoso et al. (2005, p. 36–37).

³ The income gap among families is also one of the highest in the EU, with 25 % of children living in poverty. See INE (2010) and also do Carmo (2010).

PCs, broadband access and a printer. Digital uses include free activities, especially aimed at developing skills and school success, and formal ICT courses. Local teams are composed of three to four technicians and include a young person living in the community who acts as mediator. Nineteen *Escolhas* centers were the scenario for our interviews with deprived children and young people, from 9 to 16, the same age range as the EU Kids Online study.

4 – Adapting the *EU Kids Online* questionnaire to *Escolhas*: Research method and comparability issues

Our initial aim was to compare as far as possible the EU Kids Online national results of 1000 respondents, which are representative, with those from a purposive sample of children and young people attending *Escolhas* centers. Therefore, about 50 questions from the EU Kids Online face-to-face questionnaire were selected, following, as much as possible, the protocols and guidelines defined for application and interviewing. However, a preliminary discussion with *Escolhas* local coordinators and animators made clear that even the 14+- year-olds would be unable to answer many questions by themselves, due to their low linguistic capital compared to the majority. Consequently, it was necessary to shorten and simplify several sentences to a minimum of information, to reduce even more the number of questions (see Ponte et al., 2011) and to tailor the questions for different age groups. At the end, the questionnaire was divided into two versions, one for the younger (9 to 13 years) and another for the older (14 to 16 years) respondents. The version for the 9- to 13-year-olds was designed as a structured interview of 29 questions, some of them open-ended, while the version for the 14- to 16-year-olds was a self-completion questionnaire of 29 questions that included an additional question on cultural interests and practices as well as three open-ended questions. The open-ended questions asked to younger respondents were focused on their favorite activities (*From this list of activities, what do you prefer? Why?*), restrictive mediation (*What are you not allowed to do on the internet?*), and their perception on internet safety and related practices (*Tell me what is for you using the internet in a safe way? How do you do it?*). While open-ended questions asked to older children were also focused on favorite activities, including a question on blogs for those who declared having one (*What is your blog about?*) and on internet practices related with risk and safety issues, placing them as advisors (*We have asked you some questions about good and bad things that can happen on the internet. Is there anything you would like to warn people of your own age about?*).⁴

The interviews were conducted between March and May 2011 in 19 centers in the urban areas of Lisbon and Oporto, where most of the centers are located. Children and young people were informed of the aims of the interview/questionnaire, our interest on knowing their internet experience. Although some children and young people attending the center refused to participate, others accepted the invitation by answering the questionnaire with different levels of personal involvement. Table 1 presents the distribution of the 279 respondents by gender and age group in this convenience sample, all declaring they had already accessed the internet. While age groups are relatively balanced, differences among female and male participants express the gender distribution of *Escolhas*: There are much more boys than girls attending these centers, suggesting a *gender divide* and the higher vulnerability and digital exclusion among female children and adolescents.

⁴ For an analysis on children's and young people's considerations on safety and risk issues, see Ponte, Simões, and Jorge (in press).

Demographics	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Girls	96	34
Boys	183	66
Age		
9–13	158	57
14–16	121	43

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by gender and age group. Source. *Escolhas* survey, 2011.

Although several results may be compared, the limitations of this comparison need underlining. First of all, given the process of simplification and paraphrasing, many questions remained only partially comparable, even though the same indicator was contemplated by the corresponding question. The emphasis is, in this case, on the indicator and not on the specific question asked. Nevertheless, an effort was made to keep the questions as similar as possible, thus minimizing the problems on validity and reliability that arise from this adaptation. The process of pre-testing was also essential in this case, since it provided a more accurate idea of the adequacy of the questions, leading to further care on wording.

It was not ignored that EU Kids Online is a representative sample with a considerable dimension obtained using a random route method, while the *Escolhas* sample is purposive, obtained from specific contexts, and substantially smaller. Therefore, statistically speaking, the present data have to be interpreted cautiously since it is not possible to make absolute generalizations about the population at stake. In spite of these objections and constraints, we decided comparison should be done. Since specific populations such as minority groups are usually less reachable and hard to find in standard surveys, one needs to adopt alternative methods and to approach them differently. The present study was an attempt to mitigate this limitation, providing valuable data about the online experiences of socially deprived children and young people.

5 – Online access: Contexts, families and resources

We should start by acknowledging that we are taking into account a specific population of children and young people, with a low socio-economic status and cultural constraints which ultimately may impact on their access and uses of technology. Furthermore it cannot be ignored that this very fact is framed by some of the structural characteristics of the Portuguese society mentioned above. As it is shown in the EU Kids Online survey, Portugal presents the second highest proportion of respondents from low socio-economic status (after Turkey): More than half of the Portuguese households (53 %) are classified as low SES, while the European average is 19 %.

Table 2 compares the type of family composition and parents' education considering the global EU Kids Online results, the ones from the national sample and the ones from the *Escolhas* sample, making the particularities of the socio-cultural contexts of the latter visible.

In fact, the proportion of families that do not fit the 'mainstream' pattern regarding household composition is clearly higher in the *Escolhas* sample than in Portuguese society in general or even in the European average: Two-parent families represent about half (54 %) in the *Escolhas* sample, far

below the values of 79 % in Portugal and 74 % in Europe; conversely, single-parent families have a higher proportion (35 %, against 20 % and 26 %, respectively), and situations where a grandparent or an uncle/aunt assumes the role of guardian are also slightly more common (9 %, in contrast to the residual value of 1 % in those samples).

	EU Kids Online EU25	EU Kids Online Portugal	<i>Escolhas</i> centers
Family			
Single parent	26	20	35
Two parents	74	79	54
Other	1	1	9
Education among parents			
Basic education (9 years) or less	14	47	90* 72**

Table 2: Family type and education. Source. *Escolhas* survey, 2011. *9–13 years **14–16 years.

Furthermore, while almost half (47 %) of the Portuguese households with children accessing the internet still have a parent that only achieved the basic level of education (nine years or less), among the *Escolhas* participants this percentage reaches almost the entire sample (90 %) in the case of younger children and more than two thirds, in the case of the 14- to 16-year-olds. This illustrates the low levels of school attainment among older generations, with implications at all levels of social life, namely digital inclusion. In fact, nowadays, adolescents have more school attendance than their parents and grandparents, the latter frequently illiterate: 35 % of illiterate people in 1960 and 25 % in 1970, according to National Statistics Bureau (INE, 2009).

How does this background impact on the way one understands internet access and uses? Are there significant differences between the data from *Escolhas* and from the EU Kids Online survey, both collected among children who declared to be internet users?

In Portugal, there are a few noticeable differences regarding internet access at home: It is almost assured in the national sample (92 %), while in *Escolhas* more than half of the 9- to 13-year-olds (54 %) and about one in three adolescents (30 %) do not have internet access in their households. This lack of access at home is particularly striking amongst the younger group and might be related to parents' education, thus postponing children's first internet access at home:

In fact, 50 % of the 9- to 13-year-olds whose parents have primary education or less declare having no internet access at home, against 19 % in the case of the 14- to 16-year-olds. Conversely, all children whose parents achieved tertiary education have internet access at home.

The low internet access at home among *Escolhas* respondents might also be related to the fact that most of the parents are themselves non-internet users: Only 42 % of fathers and 54 % of mothers of the 9- to 13-year-olds are internet users, while 44 % (of the parents) of the 14- to 16-year-olds use the internet. This generational gap on internet use also appears in the national data: 40 % of Portuguese parents declare not to use the internet, while among those who use the internet, 28 % declare being *not very/at all confident internet users*.

Due to the digital policies previously mentioned, in the EU Kids Online survey Portugal presents the highest rate of laptops per children (63 % of 9- to 13-year-olds and 67 % of 14- to 16-

year-olds). However, in the *Escolhas* sample there is a clear age gap: 32 % of 9- to 13-year-olds against 69 % of adolescents aged 14+). Therefore, besides gender, age seems also to have an impact on the digital experience of this population.

As Table 3 shows, for those in *Escolhas* who have access at home, the bedroom surpasses the living room or other common areas, in both age groups, a context probably not only related to the fact that a great deal of parents are internet non-users, but also to the policies that promoted the ICT access focused on its educational value for *children*.

	EU Kids Online PT		<i>Escolhas</i> centers	
	9–13 years	14–16 years	9–13 years	14–16 years
Internet access at home				
No internet access	9	5	54	30
Own bedroom	60	79	30*	62***
Living room	80	74	20**	50***
Internet access at school	65	82	52	70
Frequency of access				
Everyday or almost everyday	44	70	48	65
Once or twice a week	46	27	45	26
Once or twice a month	5	2	6	6
Less than once or twice a month	4	1	1	3

Table 3: Internet access in EU Kids Online survey and *Escolhas* survey (%). Source. EU Kids Online survey, 2010; *Escolhas* survey, 2011. Base. All children who use the internet. Own laptop. ** Shared PC. *** Everyday/several days a week.

In general, access varies with parents' education. In the case of *Escolhas*, the lack of access at home is particularly striking, especially amongst the younger group: 50 % of the 9- to 13-year-olds whose parents have primary education or less declare having no internet access at home, whereas this value is considerably lower in the case of the 14- to 16-year-olds (19 %). Also, it is in their own bedroom (particularly the older age group) that *Escolhas* children use the internet at home: 61 % of the 14-to 16-year-olds whose parents have primary education (or less) claim using the internet in their own bedroom (against 37 % in the total of this age group). So we can say that in the case of access, socioeconomical differences are somehow present, in line with other studies on digital inequalities mentioned before.

Outside the household, the school represents a relevant place of access, promoting equality of opportunities. However, in spite of the modernisation of the schools with ICT equipments and broadband, among *Escolhas*, only about half of the younger children declare to access the internet at school, against about two thirds in the national sample; among older children this gap is also present, though with higher values. Again, younger children seem to experience more reduced digital opportunities of access than the national average.

In fact, there is a relatively low value of daily access among Portuguese children in general, visible either in the EU Kids Online survey (Portugal occupies the 21st position among the 25 countries) or in *Escolhas*, despite the leadership in owning laptops. Apparently, in both samples children do not have conditions for a frequent access, and this may be related to the costs of internet

access in the households. In addition, those without internet at home have to deal with the scarcity of resources at school and in the digital centers.

Bearing in mind that the *Escolhas* sample presents a gender gap, these data point to some sort of convergence between the *Escolhas* sample and the national one for two reasons: Firstly as the proportion of families with low SES among Portuguese society is very significant, the results seem to fall into a similar pattern; secondly, *Escolhas* children represent the outcome of a particular intervention that needs to be considered within the effort of public policies toward digital inclusion. Nevertheless, the impact of particular socio-economic conditions remains visible in terms of the conditions surrounding internet access, which tends to be in line with existing literature and findings on the subject.

6 – Online experiences: Skills, activities and participation

Exploring now what we called earlier a second level of digital divide, the differences on reported skills and activities are not as visible as one would expect.

Let us start by comparing the skills reported by adolescents (aged 14+) in the three samples (Table 4). In *Escolhas*, reported skills are not too distant from the ones shown by the national sample in the EU Kids Online, and both are frequently above the European average: Portugal is in the 8th European position regarding self-reported skills. A possible factor for this might be the school's influence, related to the above policies of introducing ICTs in the curriculum. In fact, as far as teachers' mediation of the internet is concerned, Portuguese results are not far behind the leading country, the UK, in situations such as teachers talking with students about the internet (72 % against 80 %), helping them to find information or to do things on the internet (77 % against 80 %), explaining why some websites are good or bad (73 % and 79 %, respectively), or suggesting ways to behave towards other people on the internet (60 % and 68 %) (Simões, 2012).

Internet skills	<i>Escolhas</i> centers (age 14+)	EU Kids Online (age 14+)	
		Portugal	EU25
Delete the record of which sites you have visited	79	77	64
Bookmark a website	78	87	73
Block messages from someone you do not want to hear from	78	78	75
Find information on how to use the internet safely	74	78	72
Change privacy settings on a SNS	72	75	69
Block unwanted adverts or junk mail/spam	56	74	61
Compare websites to decide if information is true	47	67	65
Change filter preferences	40	60	38

Table 4: Adolescents' digital literacy and safety skills (%). Source. EU Kids Online survey, 2010; *Escolhas* survey, 2011.

% Who have ...	<i>Escolhas</i> centers		EU Kids Online PT	
	9–13 years	14–16 years	9–13 years	14–16 years
played games online	96	93	84	79
watched video clips	92	97	69	90
used the internet for school work	79	88	89	93
used instant messaging	75	95	63	92
uploaded their own photos to a SNS	74	82	25*	56*
visited a social networking profile	73	97	45	81
created a blog or online diary	n/a	31	5	16
read/watched the news	n/a	75	28	55
sent/received e-mail	68	92	63	89
downloaded music or films	47	79	35	71
uploaded their own videos	11	36	25*	56*

Table 5: Online activities (%). Source. *Escolhas* survey, 2011. * It combines “video, images and messages” and does not discriminate who uploaded the material

Informational skills are less common with *Escolhas* children in what concerns assessing general information (*bookmark a website, compare websites*), but in the case of safety skills, the percentages are similar. The self-reported skills that are to a lesser extent present in *Escolhas* are *comparing websites to decide if information is true, blocking adverts or spam* and *changing filter preferences*, and one might wonder whether this may be related to the different contexts of accessing the internet and existent time restrictions. Nevertheless, they represent very different skills (from assessing information to knowing your way around software settings), and the differences are relatively small. In some cases, the values are even slightly higher with *Escolhas* children, namely in regard to *deleting the record of sites visited* and *blocking messages from someone you do not want to hear from*. Most appear to be aware of distinct online safety skills, especially the ones related with concealing their online track or avoiding being contacted by unwanted people. In both cases, the issue of privacy and control over other’s online uses is quite obvious.

Whether the amount and diversity of self-reported skills has an impact on the internet activities is something difficult to be measured, but the question remains: Are *Escolhas* children involved differently in distinct online activities? And if so, what impact do these different skills have on their uses?

The list of activities shown in Table 5 confirms some differences, both in the type of activities and in the importance attributed to them. Among *Escolhas*, along with specific entertainment-oriented activities, communication platforms are the most frequently mentioned online uses. The importance of watching video clips, playing games, accessing social networking sites or instant messaging software are mentioned by the vast majority (in some cases, almost by everyone) in this

sample, replacing the top position of using the internet for school work, the leading activity reported by the national sample.⁵

Age and basic literacy skills such as reading and writing are important predictors of the activities children and young people are engaged with: Those related with communication software (such as e-mail, social networking sites or instant messaging) are preferably used by teenagers. Reception and consumption of contents that otherwise has to be paid for, such as reading online news or downloading music or movies, also appear to have a higher significance for *Escolhas*, particularly among teenagers. In contrast, EU Kids Online data concerning Portuguese children reveal higher values on uploading contents, which might be related to more favorable conditions for self-production. In both samples, some of the age differences found on the list of activities may reflect what has been referred to as climbing up the “ladder of opportunities” (Livingstone and Helsper, 2007), since older children tend to be more involved in a diversified range of activities as they move into adolescence.

The percentage of teenagers in the *Escolhas* sample that mention having already created a blog is also significant. Nevertheless, blogs were associated with the ICT curriculum at school, explaining the relatively high value of the answers at *Escolhas* (31 %). However, the question made visible a group of adolescent boys and girls actively involved in online creativity, self-expression and participation that does not differ quantitatively from the 10 % in the national sample.

It’s about me, it has all my favorite music. (Girl, 14)

My blog or page/site talks a bit about myself and has a space for fun and people can comment on the website and send messages. (Boy, 14)

I just put on my blog my own texts, to whom I dedicate [them to] or even texts that reflect my life experiences and events. (Girl, 15)

It depends, I have many but the main (blog) is about the things I like to do. (Boy, 15)

It’s about myself, I have the books I like to read, the music, videos and photos. (Boy, 16)

It talks about myself. (Girl, 16)

Following the assumption that the more skills children have the more engaged they would be in various online activities, all the above activities were compared to the previous list of skills. Although the results are not completely linear for the pairs of activities/skills tested, for certain skills and activities a tendency towards a positive correlation was found, thus suggesting that a diversity of skills may have a significant impact on the opportunities children might come across online.

This is the case, in the *Escolhas* sample, for safety skills such as: *blocking messages from someone you do not want to hear from*, which seems to be associated significantly with *sending messages to friends on SNS* (social networking sites) ($p < .01$), *visiting a social networking profile* and *uploading own videos to the internet* ($p < .05$); and *blocking unwanted adverts or junk mail/spam*, which is also related significantly with *exchanging private messages with friends* ($p < .02$), *visiting a social networking profile* ($p < .05$) and *commenting/posting on a blog or SNS* ($p < .01$). On the other hand, information skills, such as *comparing websites to decide if information is true*, appear to be significantly related with *downloading music or films* ($p < .02$) and *checking online services and*

⁵ Gender differences between the surveys might have contributed to this difference since in the EU Kids Online data, girls (especially younger ones) reported slightly more education-related activities than boys (90 % against 88 % among the 9- to 13-year-olds, and 93 % against 92 % amongst the 14- to 16-year-olds).

information ($p < .05$). Finally, *deleting the record of visited sites* is associated with *visiting a social networking profile* ($p < .01$).

All the above cases seem to indicate some sort of effect of certain skills on distinct online activities, which might have an impact on online safety and on how children may cope with particular risks. This is evident in the case of the active bloggers mentioned earlier: They seem to be more aware of protecting their privacy, almost all declaring they block *unwanted messages* (95 %) and *delete the records of the visited sites* (89 %). Furthermore, they present comparatively higher incidence of informational skills: 84 % know *how to bookmark a website* and 66 % report *comparing websites*. These digital skills and safety awareness are associated with a deeper engagement in online activities and with a more proactive use of the internet, thus suggesting that certain skills tend to be developed by specific uses and that the former might have a positive influence on the latter.

Although the same general effect may be found in the national sample, it follows a slightly different pattern, covering a distinct range of activities and skills. These are the cases of activities such as posting images or videos online, reading the news, watching video clips and downloading music or films. More specifically, *putting (or posting) photos, videos or music to share with others* appears to be significantly correlated with *bookmarking a website* ($p < .02$), *changing privacy settings on a SNS* ($p < .05$), *blocking unwanted adverts or junk mail/spam* ($p < .02$) and *changing filter preferences* ($p < .01$). *Reading/watching the news* is also associated with relevant corresponding activities such as *bookmarking a website* ($p < .05$) and *blocking unwanted adverts or junk mail/spam* ($p < .05$). *Watching video clips* seems to be related with *deleting the record of the sites visited* ($p < .05$), *block unwanted adverts or junk mail/spam* ($p < .005$), and *comparing websites to decide if information is true* ($p < .01$). Finally, *downloading music or films* is significantly correlated with all the skills shown in Table 4.⁶

From the above list of online activities we can only get a general idea of what the most common uses of the internet by these children and young people are. More specific uses and, most of all, activities related with risks are impossible to be clearly identified in this restricted and unspecified listing. The ambiguity of some of these activities in what concerns risky or potentially harmful situations versus opportunities remains an unanswered question.

7 – Concluding remarks

This article tried to explore the conditions of internet access and uses by children and young people from disenfranchised social environments within the context of the Portuguese society, which is marked by particular structural constraints and by recent national policies concerning digital inclusion that favored the access to laptops by students. To do so, results from a survey involving children attending the *Escolhas* program were compared as far as possible with the available national data from the EU Kids Online survey.

Children and young people interviewed in *Escolhas* are participating in a particular intervention Program on digital inclusion, and therefore their internet accesses and uses do not fully reflect the experiences of the entire population of socially deprived children. As pointed out in the

⁶ This activity is significantly correlated with all the skills considered above: “delete the record of which sites you have visited” ($p < .002$); “bookmark a website” ($p < .005$); “block messages from someone you do not want to hear from” ($p < .02$); “find information on how to use the internet safely” ($p < .002$); “change privacy settings on a SNS” ($p < .05$); “block unwanted adverts or junk mail/ spam” ($p < .02$); “compare websites to decide if information is true” ($p < .001$); and “change filter preferences” ($p < .01$).

analysis, children's age and gender seem to matter in their own access to these digital centers. We should not forget, however, that these children belong to a generation that benefits from huge social and cultural pressure regarding access to technology, not to mention the impact of governmental initiatives and public policies targeted (even if rhetorically charged) at young people's compulsory need of the internet for educational purposes.

Bearing in mind these particularities, if we noticed that a part of *Escolhas* children and adolescents lack access to the internet in a *private* and *individualized* manner, we also need to acknowledge that their uses and skills do not differ that much from the average Portuguese and the overall EU Kids Online data. Contrary to what would be expected, given the socio-economical specificity of this sample, we are not facing a completely digitally excluded group of children and young people, although their access to technology is ultimately influenced by their social and cultural background. This is something that will be clearer if we take into account their parents' lack of internet access and use, which may have an impact on their role as mediators on their children's online engagement, both in terms of opportunities and risks.

Nevertheless, there are some differences worth mentioning between the two samples examined. *Escolhas* children are apparently more oriented towards entertainment, and some digital skills (especially informational ones) appear to be less present, thus suggesting that certain online uses are not, by themselves, as advantageous as one could suppose, reflecting the need of informational literacy related to educational skills. Although the data are not completely conclusive, some findings go against the main interpretation that considers "social exclusion" and "digital exclusion" as equivalents.

Further research on deprived children and the digital is needed, especially one that enables us to grasp in a more detailed manner what are (or could be) the differences between these populations, and to what extent are they related to particular socio-economic, educational and cultural conditions. So the challenge would be to go beyond the enthusiasm of discourses on social inclusion assured by the provision of the digital access (or the catastrophist scenarios envisaged by others, and provide further, solid findings about an ever-changing reality.

Bionotes

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