

Digital Socialization – Strengths and Weaknesses

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Abstract

Digital socialisation has become a significant dimension of contemporary social life, as interpersonal communication, identity construction, learning, cultural participation and civic engagement are increasingly mediated by digital technologies. The goal was to analyse digital socialisation, highlighting its theoretical foundations, distinctive features, strengths and weaknesses. The theoretical framework draws on classical and contemporary contributions, including symbolic interactionism, social learning theory, socio-cultural learning theory, network society theory, participatory culture, media education, algorithmic power and the concept of the networked self. Particular attention is given to the becoming of *Homo Digitalis*, understood as the contemporary social actor whose identity, cognition, communication and relational life are deeply shaped by digital environments. To identify the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the digital socialisation, the research methodology consisted in three focus group interviews with 43 students and master's students in educational sciences fields. The qualitative analysis of the interviews emphasises the ambivalent nature of digital socialisation: while it supports communication, learning, creativity, identity exploration, civic participation and digital competence development, it also involves risks such as superficial interaction, misinformation, cyberbullying, privacy vulnerability, dependence on digital validation, algorithmic influence and digital inequality. The paper concludes that education must address digital socialisation explicitly through media literacy, algorithmic awareness, ethical communication and responsible digital citizenship.

Keywords: *digital socialisation; Homo Digitalis; teacher education; media literacy; digital identity*

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Introduction

Digital socialisation constitutes a central topic in contemporary social sciences due to the fact that social life is increasingly extended and transformed by digital technologies. The everyday use of digital technologies - smartphones, social media platforms, online learning environments, virtual reality, algorithmic recommendation systems and artificial intelligence tools - has changed how people communicate, how they construct their identities, participate in communities, learn social norms and become members of different communities. We can no longer analyse socialisation exclusively as a face-to-face process taking place only in physical environments within families, schools, peer groups and local communities. It must also be examined as a digitally mediated process, shaped by platforms, networks, algorithms and hybrid forms of social presence. (Castells, 1996; Papacharissi, 2011; Selwyn, 2016). Still, this relatively new form of socialization is not fully charted, yet. Although many studies address digital media, online interaction, digital identity, children's internet use, youth and technology, the process through which individuals internalise norms, values, behaviours, roles and cultural meanings in digital environments remains complex, dynamic and theoretically challenging. (Livingstone, 2009; Granic et al., 2020). Also, digital socialisation is a challenging process both for citizens as social actors and for researchers. For citizens, the digital environment creates opportunities for expression, learning, participation and connection, but also exposes them to risks such as misinformation, cyberbullying, surveillance, superficial interaction, addiction-like behaviours and identity fragmentation. (Buckingham, 2015; Livingstone, 2009; Turkle, 2011). For researchers, digital socialisation is difficult to study because it is rapid, multi-layered, platform-dependent, algorithmically influenced and constantly changing. (Bucher, 2018; Dalsgaard, 2023). Another argument to analyse digital socialisation is the particularities of native digital generations. Young people who have grown up in a world structured by digital technologies develop forms of communication, attention, self-presentation, cultural participation and learning that differ from those of previous generations. Prensky's distinction between digital

natives and digital immigrants has been widely discussed in this respect, even though it should be used critically, because generational membership alone does not guarantee digital competence. (Prensky, 2001; Selwyn, 2016). The concept of *Homo Digitalis* is increasingly used to describe the human being whose everyday life, identity, cognition, communication and social relations are profoundly intertwined with digital technologies. From a future generation development and education perspective, the analysis of digital socialisation is quite challenging, especially for educational practice. Teacher education programmes cannot ignore the fact that students' identities, values and social skills are partly formed in digital environments. Therefore, initial teacher education providers should develop programmes that help future teachers become aware of the strengths and weaknesses of digital socialisation, so they will be prepared to combat the negative effects of this form of socialisation, to cultivate digital and media literacy of their future pupils, and also to help develop the ability to build meaningful relationships both online and offline. (Buckingham, 2015; Livingstone, 2009; Selwyn, 2016).

The goal of this paper was to analyse the digital socialisation, highlighting its theoretical foundations, distinctive features, and to identify if the students enrolled in bachelor and master programs for teacher education are aware of the particularities of digital socialisation and of its strengths and weaknesses.

The revision of the speciality literature.

From the perspective of the social sciences, socialisation refers to the lifelong process through which individuals become members of society by internalising social norms, values, roles, behaviours, language, cultural meanings and patterns of interaction. Classical approaches understand socialisation as a process through which society reproduces itself by transmitting culture from one generation to another. Symbolic interactionism emphasises the role of interaction, language and the self in the construction of social identity, while social learning theory underlines imitation, modelling and

reinforcement (Bandura, 1977; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Mead, 1934). Socialisation is therefore both a process of adaptation to society and a process of identity construction. Digital socialisation may be defined as the process through which individuals acquire, internalise, negotiate and transform social norms, values, identities, roles, behaviours and cultural practices through digitally mediated interaction. This definition includes two complementary aspects. On the one hand, digital socialisation represents the adaptation of traditional socialisation processes to digital contexts: family, school, peer groups and institutions continue to socialise individuals, but they do so increasingly through digital tools, online communication and virtual learning spaces. On the other hand, digital socialisation also refers to the emergence of new forms of identity formation, interaction, cultural participation and belonging that are specific to technology-mediated environments (Papacharissi, 2011; Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, digital socialisation should not be understood as a secondary or artificial form of socialisation, but as a significant dimension of contemporary social life. It is a hybrid, relational, mediated and socio-technical process through which individuals learn how to be present, visible, responsible, connected and recognised in digital society (Castells, 1996; Bucher, 2018).

The study of digital socialisation requires an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, comprising classical and modern perspectives. From a classical sociological perspective, socialisation is connected with the internalisation of social reality. Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that society is constructed through processes of externalisation, objectivation and internalisation of every aspect that form a specific social reality of the individuals. Each of them is born into a social world that already exists and gradually learns to understand it as meaningful and legitimate. In digital societies, part of this socially constructed reality is mediated by digital environments. Online platforms, virtual communities, social media spaces, digital games and learning platforms become contexts in which meanings are produced, stabilised, contested and internalised. Thus, the analysis of how social networks mediate this internalisation becomes relevant. Therefore, we can use Castells' (1996) concept of the network society to analyse

digital socialisation in contemporary societies, in which power, communication and identity are increasingly organised through networks, where relationships are less limited by geographical proximity and more dependent on connectivity, visibility and access. Boyd's concept of "networked publics" is useful here, because digital spaces function simultaneously as spaces of interaction and as imagined audiences. These spaces have specific affordances, including persistence, visibility, spreadability and searchability (Boyd, 2010).

Understanding digital socialisation as a self and identity formation process implies the symbolic interactionism perspective. Mead (1934) emphasised that the self emerges through social interaction and through the ability to take the role of the other. In digital contexts, the "generalised other" may be represented not only by family, peers or school, but also by online audiences, followers, communities, influencers and algorithmically structured publics. In digital environments, individuals manage impressions through profile pictures, posts, comments, likes, stories, videos, avatars and other symbolic resources. Therefore, Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation is particularly useful for analysing online identity. The online self becomes curated, performed and continuously evaluated by visible and invisible audiences (Boyd, 2010; Papacharissi, 2011). In digital spaces, identity is constructed through interaction, visibility, self-presentation and participation in networked publics. Papacharissi (2011) emphasises that social network sites are not only communication tools, but also spaces where individuals perform identity, negotiate belonging and participate in communities. This perspective supports the idea that digital socialisation is not simply a transfer of traditional socialisation into online contexts, but also the emergence of new forms of identity construction and social presence. (Papacharissi, 2011).

Also, for identity formation, Erikson's theory of psychosocial development is relevant, especially for adolescence and emerging adulthood, when identity formation is a central developmental task. Digital environments provide spaces for experimentation, self-expression, belonging and feedback. However, they may also increase

insecurity, comparison, social anxiety and identity confusion. Also, digital identity is often multiple, fluid and context-dependent, because individuals may present different versions of themselves across platforms and communities (Erikson, 1968; Granic et al., 2020).

Thinking of the internal mechanism of acquiring "the social", Bandura's (1977) social learning theory offers another important perspective. Digital environments expose individuals to numerous models of behaviour, offered by influencers, peers, public figures, teachers, gamers, activists and content creators, from whom users learn attitudes, behaviours, communication styles and values. The processes of observation, imitation and reinforcement are amplified by platform mechanisms such as likes, shares, views, comments and recommendations (Bandura, 1977; Bucher, 2018).

Moreover, in contemporary societies, digital technologies can be understood as cultural tools that mediate learning, communication and identity formation. According to Vygotsky (1978), higher mental functions develop through social interaction and are mediated by cultural tools. Concepts such as mediation, internalisation and the zone of proximal development are relevant for analysing how learners acquire digital practices through interaction with peers, teachers, online communities and technological artefacts. Digital socialisation is therefore a mediated socio-cultural process (Vygotsky, 1978; Dalsgaard, 2023). Jenkins' (2006) theory of participatory culture help understand that digital users are not only passive recipients of information, they are also producers, remixers and distributors of content. Through online participation, individuals acquire cultural competences, collaborative skills and forms of civic engagement. However, participatory culture also requires critical literacy, because not all participation is democratic, inclusive or ethical (Jenkins, 2006; Buckingham, 2015). In consequence, it is important to understand digital socialisation also from the perspective of media education. Buckingham (2015) argues that media education should not be reduced to technical skills or instrumental use of digital tools. Instead, it should develop critical understanding of how media messages are produced, circulated and interpreted. From this point of view, digital socialisation requires more than access to technology. It requires the

development of critical media literacy, through which individuals learn to question representation, ideology, commercial interests, audience positioning and power relations. This perspective is highly relevant for teacher education, because teachers must help learners become reflective and critical participants in digital culture. Livingstone's analysis of children's internet use also offers an important theoretical foundation. Livingstone (2009) shows that the internet creates both great expectations and challenging realities. Digital environments can support children's learning, communication, creativity and participation, but they also expose them to risks related to privacy, harmful content, online vulnerability and unequal access. Her work is relevant because it avoids both technological optimism and moral panic and it supports a balanced interpretation of digital socialisation as a process that includes opportunities and risks at the same time.

Another aspect relevant for a better understanding of digital socialisation is the concept of algorithmic power. Algorithms influence what users see, what becomes visible, what is recommended, what is hidden and what forms of behaviour are rewarded. Bucher (2018) argues that algorithmic systems organise social life through conditional logics of visibility and relevance. Therefore, digital socialisation is shaped not only by human actors, but also by platform architectures and algorithmic decisions. This has major implications for education, because users must learn to understand how algorithmic environments influence attention, information exposure, social comparison and cultural participation.

Gee's work on video games and learning expands the educational dimension of digital socialisation. Gee (2003) argues that video games can create complex learning environments in which players develop problem-solving skills, situated meanings, strategic thinking, collaboration and identity experimentation. From this perspective, digital socialisation also occurs through game-based communities, virtual worlds and interactive narratives. Digital games are not only entertainment products; they may function as environments of literacy, participation, role-taking and informal learning.

Turkle's work provides a critical perspective on the emotional and relational consequences of digital communication. He argues that although digital technologies connect individuals, they may also produce loneliness, reduced empathy and a preference for controlled forms of interaction (Turkle, 2011). This perspective is important for the analysis of the weaknesses of digital socialisation, highlighting the risk that online communication may sometimes replace deeper forms of face-to-face dialogue and may encourage fragmented attention, emotional distance and dependence on mediated validation.

More recent sociomaterial approaches emphasise that technology is not a neutral instrument. Digital platforms shape human action through design, architecture, algorithms, metrics and affordances. Thus, digital socialisation is not produced only by human interaction; it is co-produced by humans and digital infrastructures. Algorithms influence what individuals see, whom they interact with, what becomes visible and what forms of behaviour are rewarded. This makes digital socialisation a socio-technical process (Bucher, 2018; Selwyn, 2016).

All these theoretical contributions allow for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of digital socialisation as a psychosocial process and have highlighted its positive and negative characteristics. However, how digital socialisation is perceived and understood by future teachers has not been sufficiently investigated. For future teachers and educational specialists, understanding digital socialisation is essential because it allows them to connect with current generations of students – the native digital students –, to combat online risks (cyberbullying, disinformation), to understand students' digital culture and communicate more effectively with them, to ensure the formation of responsible digital citizens, capable of participating actively and ethically in contemporary society. and to use technology as an effective tool for their development.

Research methodology

Research goal

The main goal of the research is to identify the perceptions of teachers, future teachers and current teachers, regarding digital socialisation, with particular emphasis on the perceived strengths and weaknesses of this type of socialisation. The research is based on the assumption that teachers and future teachers are important social actors in the process of digital socialisation. They are not only users of digital technologies, but also mediators of students' digital experiences. Their perceptions influence how digital tools are integrated into education, how online risks are addressed and how the positive potential of digital socialisation is cultivated. In order to achieve the research goal, we established the following **research objectives**:

- To identify how students and master's students preparing for or involved in teaching define digital socialisation.
- To explore their perceptions of the main characteristics of digital socialisation.
- To identify the perceived strengths of digital socialisation in educational and social contexts.
- To identify the perceived weaknesses and risks associated with digital socialisation.
- To analyse how participants understand the role of teachers in guiding digital socialisation.
- To formulate educational implications for teacher training, digital citizenship education and media literacy education.

Research method

The study uses a qualitative research design based on the qualitative analysis of three focus group interviews. The use of focus groups in researching the digital socialization of future teachers offers strong pragmatic arguments: it generates in-depth data on subjective perceptions, stimulates critical reflection through direct interaction, and explores the nuances "behind the numbers" regarding their future pedagogical competences. Unlike individual interviews, focus groups stimulate dialogue, comparison of opinions and collective reflection.

(Agabrian, 2004; Onwuegbuzie & al., 2009). This is particularly relevant for a topic such as digital socialisation, which is socially constructed and experienced through interaction, and allow the researcher to understand how participants interpret digital socialisation and how they construct meanings around its strengths and weaknesses.

Research sample

The research sample consists of 43 students and master's students, future and current teachers, enrolled in bachelor's or master's programs in educational sciences from Valahia University of Targoviște. The study used a non-probability convenience sampling procedure. This type of sampling was considered appropriate because the research aimed to explore participants' perceptions, meanings and interpretations rather than to obtain statistically representative results. In qualitative focus-group research, participants are usually selected according to their accessibility, relevance to the research topic and capacity to provide meaningful information about the phenomenon under investigation. All participants were female, and the average age of the group was 23.5 years. Participants were selected because they were accessible to the researchers and because their academic and professional training positioned them as relevant informants for the study. As future or current teachers, they were expected to have both personal experience with digital environments and an emerging professional perspective on the educational implications of digital socialisation. The recruitment process involved inviting students who met the inclusion criteria to participate voluntarily in the study. The main inclusion criteria were: enrolment in a bachelor's or master's level programs of teacher education, willingness to participate in a focus-group discussion and availability at the time scheduled for data collection. Participation was voluntary, and the respondents were informed about the academic purpose of the research, the confidentiality of their responses and their right to withdraw from the study.

Data collection

Data were collected through three focus group interviews conducted in face-to-face format, on three different days over one week in December 2025. Each focus group lasts around 60 minutes. To ensure research ethics, before the interviews began, the researcher clearly presented verbally the purpose of the focus group, the topic analysed, the duration of the session, the fact that participation was voluntary and they could withdraw from the group at any time without any consequences. Also, they were assured of the confidentiality of the answers and that they would be used only for the research. This information was also specified in writing, and all participants signed that they had taken note of and agreed to participate in the focus-group interviews.

The interviews were structured around open-ended questions:

1. How do future and current teachers understand the concept of digital socialisation?
2. What dimensions of digital socialisation are most visible in their discourse?
3. What strengths do participants associate with digital socialisation?
4. What weaknesses or risks do participants identify?
5. How do participants perceive the relationship between digital socialisation and traditional face-to-face socialisation?
6. What educational responsibilities do teachers have in relation to digital socialisation?
7. How do participants understand the role of media literacy and critical digital competence in guiding digital socialisation?

The focus group moderator encouraged participants to express personal opinions, provide examples, react to the ideas of others and reflect on the educational implications of digital socialisation.

Analysis and interpretation of the research data

The data obtained from the three focus-group interviews were analysed using the constant comparison method, a qualitative analytical strategy associated with grounded theory approaches and constructivist grounded theory in particular (Charmaz, 2000). This

method was considered appropriate for the present research because the study aimed to explore how participants construct meanings regarding digital socialisation, its strengths and its weaknesses, rather than to test predefined hypotheses. All participants' responses were analysed at the group level, without disclosing personal identities.

The analysis began with the transcription and repeated reading of the three focus-group interviews in order to achieve familiarity with the data. During this stage, the researchers focused on identifying significant statements, recurrent ideas, relevant examples and meanings expressed by participants in relation to digital socialisation. The data were approached inductively, allowing categories to emerge from participants' discourse while also maintaining sensitivity to the theoretical framework of the study. Each interview was examined line by line or segment by segment, and meaningful units of text were assigned initial codes. Examples of initial codes included "access to information," "fast communication," "loss of authentic interaction," "online identity construction," "risk of misinformation," "dependence on social media," "teacher guidance," "digital competences" and "privacy vulnerability."

The constant comparison procedure was applied throughout the coding process. Each coded segment was compared with previous segments from the same interview and with segments from the other two interviews. This enabled the researchers to identify similarities, differences, repetitions, contradictions and variations in participants' perceptions. For example, statements referring to digital socialisation as a learning opportunity were compared with statements describing it as a source of distraction or superficiality. Similarly, participants' references to online communication as a form of connection were compared with references to emotional distance or reduced face-to-face interaction. In the second stage, similar codes were grouped into broader conceptual categories. Through constant comparison, initial codes were refined, merged, differentiated or reorganised. Categories were developed only when they were supported by multiple data segments and when they captured relevant patterns in the participants' discourse. The emerged categories included: meanings attributed to digital socialisation, communicational benefits, educational

opportunities, identity and self-presentation, relational changes, emotional vulnerabilities, risks and threats, algorithmic and informational challenges, and the teacher's mediating role.

In the third stage, the categories were compared across the three focus groups. This cross-interview comparison allowed the researchers to determine whether certain themes appeared consistently in all groups or whether they were specific to one group. The purpose was not to quantify responses, but to understand the range and depth of meanings expressed by participants. Particular attention was given to convergent themes, divergent interpretations and tensions within participants' discourse. In the fourth stage, analytical themes were constructed. Following Charmaz's constructivist perspective, the analysis did not treat categories as mechanically discovered from the data, but as interpretative constructions developed through the interaction between participants' meanings, the research questions and the researcher's analytical sensitivity (Charmaz, 2000; Onwuegbuzie & al., 2009). The final themes were therefore grounded in the empirical data, but also theoretically informed by the literature on digital socialisation, media literacy, networked identity, algorithmic power and teacher education. Throughout the analysis, memo writing was used to document emerging interpretations, relationships between categories and possible explanations of the data. Memos supported reflexivity and helped the researchers move from descriptive coding to conceptual interpretation. This was important because the research aimed not only to list participants' opinions, but also to understand how future and current teachers interpret digital socialisation as a complex educational and social phenomenon.

The use of constant comparison enhanced the analytical rigour of the study by ensuring that categories were continuously checked against the data from all three interviews. At the same time, the method allowed the researchers to preserve the interpretative and exploratory character of the research. Since the study was based on convenience sampling and qualitative focus-group data, the purpose of the analysis was not generalisation, but the development of an in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions of digital socialisation.

The constant comparison analysis led to the identification of several major thematic directions: participants' conceptualisation of digital socialisation; perceived strengths such as communication, access to information, learning opportunities and social connection; perceived weaknesses such as superficial interaction, misinformation, dependency, emotional vulnerability and privacy risks; the relationship between digital and face-to-face socialisation; and the perceived role of teachers in guiding responsible digital participation.

The emerged major themes are presented below:

1. Definitions of digital socialization

This theme concentrates the participants' conceptualisation of digital socialization: a process of technologically mediated communication, connection and interaction, carried out in the online environment. The most frequent key-words are "communication" and "connection", which shows that participants associate digital socialization primarily with the possibility of transmitting messages, staying in touch with others and building relationships through technology. The terms "interaction/interaction", "online", "technology", "connectivity" and "connection" complemented this perspective, suggesting that digital socialization is perceived as a form of relationship achieved through platforms, applications, the internet and digital devices. The responses indicate several dimensions of the concept:

- a) communication dimension: digital socialization is seen as message exchange, fast communication, remote communication and communication in online environments.
- b) relational dimension: terms such as "relationships", "relationship", "friendship", "community", "connection" appear, which shows that respondents associate it with maintaining or building social relationships.
- c) technological dimension: the words "technology", "internet", "platform", "applications", "computer", "laptop" show that participants are aware of the technologically mediated nature of the process.
- d) spatial and accessibility dimension: responses such as "limitless", "globalization", "accessibility", "virtual", "remote

communication” suggest the idea of overcoming physical and geographical limits.

- e) identity and community dimension: the appearance of the terms “identity”, “collectivity”, “community” indicates that some respondents also intuit the role of digital socialization in the formation of belonging and self-image in the digital space.

Overall, the definitions are mostly functional and experiential: respondents describe digital socialization in terms of what it concretely enables — communication, relationships, connection, access to information — rather than through a broad theoretical definition. However, the answers capture the core of the concept: digital socialization is a form of social participation mediated by technology, through which individuals communicate, interact, build relationships and belong to online communities.

2. *Perceived strengths of digital socialization*

The most evident identified strength is the facilitation of *communication*. The term “communication” appears most frequently, while related terms such as “fast communication,” “long-distance communication,” “communication in the online environment,” “messages” and “communication applications” suggest that respondents perceive digital socialisation as an effective means of transmitting information and maintaining contact with others. A second strength is the *connection between people*. Words such as “connection,” “connectivity,” “link” and “relationships” show that digital socialisation is associated with the possibility of *creating or maintaining social ties*, even when people are not located in the same physical space. This is related to another advantage - *overcoming spatial limitations*. Responses such as “without limits,” “globalisation,” “long-distance communication,” “virtual” and “online” indicate that digital socialisation is perceived as a form of interaction that enables relationships regardless of distance. This characteristic supports a fourth strength - *accessibility*. Most of the respondents saw technology as a facilitator of social interaction (M, 24: “through digital devices and platforms, communication becomes easier to initiate and maintain”). Another strength is *the development of relationships and a sense of belonging to communities*. Words such

as “community,” “collectivity,” “friendship,” “relating” and “digital relating” indicates that respondents associate digital socialisation with the formation of social networks, groups of belonging and spaces for community interaction. Finally, but not the last important identified strength is the *rapid access to information*. Terms such as “information,” “connection between information and technology” and “communication/access/online” indicate that digital socialisation is perceived not only as interpersonal relating, but also as an exchange of information in the digital space.

3. Perceived weaknesses and risks of digital socialization

The most explicit weakness identified was “risks”. This indicates that respondents are aware that digital socialisation is not only beneficial, but can also involve vulnerabilities, dangers or negative effects. The image does not detail the nature of these risks, but they can be correlated with issues such as excessive exposure, disinformation, cyberbullying, loss of privacy or superficial relationships. Another weakness that emerged was the incomplete or unclear nature of the understanding of the concept. In each group, there were few respondents used the term “unknown”, which suggests that for some participants, the concept of digital socialisation is not clear or familiar enough. This may indicate a need for conceptual clarification and digital education.

Another identified vulnerability is the reduction of digital socialization to technological communication. The dominance of the terms “communication”, “connection”, “online”, “technology”, “internet” shows that respondents perceive the phenomenon mainly functionally, as simple communication through technology. Dimensions such as digital identity, online social norms, ethical behavior, belonging, the influence of algorithms or cultural formation are less visible. This reduction can be considered a weakness in perception, as digital socialisation is a more complex process than simply using the internet for communication. Related to the use of technology for communication, an associated weakness identified was the fact that digital socialisation is conditioned by access to technological infrastructure, which can generate exclusion for people who do not have access, digital skills or sufficient material resources.

Also, a risk of relational superficiality was also identified. Although terms like “relationships”, “friendship”, “messages” and “online” indicate the possibility of relationships, they can also suggest a faster, more fragmented and less profound form of socialization than face-to-face interaction.

4. Differences from face-to-face socialisation

One important perceived difference refers to the *mediation of interaction*. While face-to-face socialisation is based on direct physical presence, verbal and non-verbal communication, digital socialisation is understood by respondents as interaction mediated by technology. The repeated use of terms such as “online,” “technology,” “internet,” “platform,” “applications,” “computer” and “social media” indicates that participants associate digital socialisation with technical tools and virtual environments. A second identified difference concerns *spatial distance and accessibility*. Words such as “long-distance communication,” “without limits,” “globalisation,” “virtual” and “online” suggest that respondents perceive digital socialisation as a form of social interaction that overcomes geographical boundaries. Unlike face-to-face socialisation, which usually requires physical proximity, digital socialisation is seen as enabling communication and relationship maintenance regardless of distance. A third difference concerns the *speed and efficiency of communication*. Responses such as “fast communication” and “rapid” indicate that digital socialisation may be perceived as faster and more immediate than face-to-face interaction. This suggests an instrumental understanding of digital socialisation as a quick and accessible way of exchanging messages, information and social signals. A fourth inferred difference refers to *the nature of relationships*. Terms such as “relationships,” “relating,” “friendship,” “community,” “collectivity” and “online friendship” show that respondents associate digital socialisation with the development or maintenance of social bonds in the digital space. However, the predominance of terms related to communication and connection, rather than emotional depth, presence or authenticity, may suggest that participants perceive digital socialisation as more functional and mediated than face-to-face socialisation. A fifth difference concerns *the role of information and digital content*. The

presence of terms such as “information,” “communication/ access/ online”, and “connection between information and technology” suggests that respondents understand digital socialisation not only as interpersonal contact, but also as participation in information flows. Compared with face-to-face socialisation, digital socialisation seems to be associated more strongly with access to information, online content and technologically mediated exchanges. At the same time, the perceived vulnerabilities of digital socialisation are an important difference when compared with face-to-face interaction. As mentioned above, respondents are aware of risks associated to the digital environment, of the insufficient conceptual clarity regarding digital socialisation, and of dependence on access to devices, internet connectivity and digital competences, while face-to-face socialisation is less dependent on such technical conditions.

5. The teacher's role in guiding digital socialisation

There are several educational responsibilities identified, that teachers may assume in relation to digital socialisation. Teachers in service, and future teachers, perceived themselves not only as transmitters of knowledge, but also as mediators, guides and facilitators of students' responsible participation in digital environments. The most emphasised role in all the discussions was the one related to the development of students' digital literacy. Digital socialisation is perceived as strongly dependent on technological tools and digital infrastructures. Therefore, teachers should support students in understanding how to use digital technologies effectively, safely and purposefully. Digital literacy should not be limited to operational skills, but should also include the ability to select appropriate digital tools, communicate effectively online, evaluate digital resources and understand the implications of one's digital actions.

Related to pupils' digital literacy is the development of media literacy and the teacher's role in these competencies. However, this responsibility was only mentioned in the last focus group, which consisted of the majority of participants who had previously undergone training in professional digital competence courses. They identified it as teachers' responsibility to help students critically

analyse online content, distinguish between reliable and unreliable information, recognise misinformation and understand how media messages are produced and circulated. Responsibilities related to the development of ethical online behaviour emerged in all discussions, especially in relation to codes like “interaction,” “relationships,” “community”/“collectivity”, showing that digital socialisation involves social relations and forms of belonging. Consequently, teachers should help students understand that online interaction is not separate from social responsibility. Respectful communication, empathy, tolerance, protection of privacy, responsible sharing of content and awareness of the consequences of online behaviour should become important components of educational guidance. Also, although the participants mainly described digital socialisation through positive or neutral terms such as “connection,” “communication,” “friendship” and “community,” they admitted that digital interaction can also involve some emotional risks, such as social comparison, exclusion, cyberbullying or superficial relationships. Therefore, teachers should help students reflect on the emotional effects of digital participation and develop healthier forms of online presence. This includes encouraging balance between online and face-to-face interaction, developing self-regulation and promoting meaningful communication rather than constant connectivity.

Another identified responsibility was regarding the teachers role as mediators between digital and face-to-face socialisation. The participants’ responses suggest that digital socialisation is perceived as technologically mediated, online, rapid and accessible, while face-to-face socialisation remains implicitly associated with physical presence and direct interaction. Teachers can help students understand the complementarity between these two forms of socialisation. Rather than presenting digital socialisation as a replacement for face-to-face interaction, teachers should guide students towards a balanced integration of online and offline relationships.

Discussions

Digital socialisation is one of the defining processes of contemporary society. It reflects the transformation of social life under the influence

of digital technologies and requires careful analysis from sociological, psychological, educational and cultural perspectives. The concept refers both to the adaptation of traditional socialisation processes to digital environments and to the emergence of new forms of identity construction, communication, belonging, learning and cultural participation mediated by technology.

The participants' responses are consistent with recent literature showing that digital socialisation is often understood through its practical and experiential functions. Studies on digital socialisation, online interaction and social media use indicate that individuals frequently associate digital environments with communication, connection, access to information, relationship maintenance and participation in online communities (Gebremariam, 2024; Pronina et al., 2020; Winstone et al., 2021). In this respect, the respondents' definitions are mostly functional: they describe digital socialisation in terms of what it enables in practice, rather than through an abstract or theoretically elaborate definition. This functional understanding is also supported by research on online friendship networks, social connectedness and online communities. Digital media are often used to maintain relationships, create new social ties, participate in peer networks and experience belonging in online spaces (Al-Jbouri et al., 2024; Oksanen et al., 2024). Similarly, studies on adolescents' and young people's use of social media show that online environments contribute to identity expression, self-presentation, social comparison and interaction with online audiences (Pérez-Torres, 2024). Therefore, even when respondents define digital socialisation through simple terms such as communication, connection or interaction, these terms capture essential dimensions of the concept. At the same time, recent studies suggest that digital socialisation is not limited to interpersonal communication. It also includes participation in digital cultures, online communities, mediated symbolic interaction and the development of new forms of belonging and identity. Social media platforms and digital communication tools create spaces where individuals exchange information, maintain relationships, negotiate visibility and participate in collective forms of social life (Angelini et al., 2024; Ju, 2024; Villi et al., 2016). Thus, the respondents' answers reflect a practical

understanding of digital socialisation, but they also converge with the core theoretical meaning of the concept: digital socialisation is a form of technology-mediated social participation through which individuals communicate, interact, build relationships and belong to online communities.

Also, the research indicates a predominantly positive representation of digital socialisation, with more strengths than weaknesses. The strengths identified in the participants' responses — facilitating communication, maintaining relationships at a distance, quick access to information and belonging to digital communities — are also supported by research on online communities and social media use. Online communities can provide opportunities for belonging, support and participation, while social media may contribute to friendship quality, peer interaction and perceived connectedness (Angelini et al., 2024; Oksanen et al., 2024). Thus, the respondents' functional definitions capture important dimensions of digital socialisation as technology-mediated social participation. At the same time, the weaknesses are less explicitly formulated in the participants' answers, but they can be interpreted in relation to the risks described in recent literature. Digital socialisation may involve online risks, dependence on technological mediation, social comparison, superficial relationships and vulnerability to group norms or platform dynamics (Oksanen et al., 2024; Pérez-Torres, 2024; Winstone et al., 2021). Therefore, the data suggest a mainly positive perception of digital socialisation, while also indicating the need for a more critical understanding of its social, emotional and educational implications.

Regarding the differences between digital and face-to-face socialisation, the participants' answers suggest that digital socialisation is perceived as different from face-to-face socialisation mainly through its technological mediation, online character, speed, accessibility and ability to overcome spatial limits. This interpretation is consistent with recent research on digital socialisation and social media use, which shows that digital environments are frequently understood through their capacity to enable communication, connection, interaction and relationship maintenance. Gebremariam et

al. (2024), for example, explicitly connect digital socialisation with interpersonal communication motives and social interaction in social networks. From this perspective, the participants' emphasis on terms such as "communication," "connection," "interaction," "online" and "technology" reflects a functional understanding of digital socialisation as a practical means of maintaining social contact and participating in digitally mediated relationships. The distinction between digital and face-to-face socialisation also emerges through the perceived capacity of digital environments to overcome spatial distance. Respondents' references to online communication, connection, virtual interaction, accessibility, rapid communication and the absence of limits suggest that digital socialisation is viewed as less dependent on physical co-presence than face-to-face socialisation. This interpretation is supported by Winstone et al. (2021), who show that social media may stimulate connectedness with peers and family by enabling contact beyond immediate physical contexts. In this sense, digital socialisation appears to be perceived as a form of social interaction that extends the possibilities of communication, especially when direct physical interaction is not possible or is limited by distance, time or context.

However, an important aspect of the data is not only what participants mention, but also what they do not mention. Aspects such as emotional depth, authenticity, non-verbal communication, empathy and embodied presence are not explicitly present in the responses. This absence may suggest that participants distinguish digital socialisation from face-to-face socialisation precisely through its weaker dependence on direct personal presence. Face-to-face socialisation usually involves embodied interaction, immediate feedback, facial expression, voice tone, gestures, physical proximity and a stronger sense of interpersonal presence. By contrast, the respondents' vocabulary defines digital socialisation mainly through mediation, connectivity and access, rather than through emotional or embodied dimensions. This absence can be interpreted in relation to Winstone et al. (2021), who discuss the ambivalent relationship between social media use and social connectedness. Digital media may stimulate social connection, but they may also displace or modify

direct forms of interaction. The respondents' emphasis on communication and connection, combined with the absence of references to emotional depth or embodied interaction, may therefore indicate that digital socialisation is perceived as efficient and accessible, but not necessarily equivalent to face-to-face socialisation in terms of relational depth, empathy or authenticity.

The data can also be connected with Pérez-Torres' (2024) analysis of social media as a "digital social mirror" for identity development. Although the participants do not explicitly mention identity construction in a systematic way, the presence of terms such as "identity," "friendship," "community" and "relationships" suggests that digital socialisation may also involve self-presentation and social recognition. Pérez-Torres (2024) shows that social media contribute to identity development through self-presentation, social comparison, role models and online audiences. This perspective helps deepen the interpretation of the participants' answers: even when digital socialisation is defined in functional terms, it may still involve more complex processes of identity construction and social validation.

Overall, the participants' responses are consistent with recent literature in showing that digital socialisation is commonly associated with communication, connection, interaction, accessibility and participation in online spaces. However, the data also reveal a limited and predominantly functional understanding of the concept. The lack of explicit references to emotional depth, empathy, authenticity, non-verbal communication and embodied presence suggests that participants implicitly distinguish digital socialisation from face-to-face socialisation by associating it more strongly with mediated communication than with direct interpersonal presence. Therefore, the findings indicate that digital socialisation is perceived as an accessible and efficient form of social participation, but one that may require further educational clarification regarding its emotional, ethical, relational and identity-related implications.

Regarding teachers' responsibilities in digital socialisation, the research findings are consistent with recent literature on critical digital literacy, media education and digital citizenship education, which emphasises that the educational role of teachers cannot be reduced to

encouraging the use of digital technologies. Rather, teachers are expected to help students understand the social, ethical, emotional and cognitive implications of digital participation. Villar-Onrubia et al. (2022) argue that educators' critical digital literacy is essential for fostering ethical technology use and developing digital citizenship, while Ilomäki et al. (2023) show that critical digital literacies at school level involve much more than operational digital skills. These perspectives support the idea that digital socialisation should be guided through reflection, critique and responsible participation. The role of teachers is also supported by research on media education and online civic engagement. Consoli et al. (2024) show that different media education practices are connected with students' online civic engagement and respectful online behaviour, suggesting that school-based interventions may shape the quality of students' digital participation. Similarly, the Council of Europe's *Digital Citizenship Education Handbook* frames digital citizenship as a multidimensional educational responsibility, involving values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and critical understanding. This supports the view that teachers should act as facilitators of digital literacy, media literacy, ethical communication, emotional balance and responsible digital citizenship. From this perspective, teachers become mediators between spontaneous digital socialisation and reflective digital participation. Their role is to help students critically evaluate digital content, communicate ethically, understand online risks, manage digital identity, protect privacy, recognise algorithmic influence and participate constructively in digital communities. The DigCompEdu framework further supports this role by emphasising that educators need specific digital competences in order to help learners develop their own digital competence. Therefore, teacher guidance is essential for transforming digital socialisation from an informal, spontaneous and sometimes risky process into an educationally meaningful experience.

Research limits

Several methodological limitations of the research should be acknowledged:

The study is based on a convenience sample, which limits the possibility of generalising the findings to a broader population of students, future teachers or teachers. The participants were selected because they were accessible and relevant to the topic, not through random sampling. Therefore, the results should be interpreted as exploratory insights into the perceptions of this particular group, rather than as representative conclusions.

Also, the sample is relatively homogeneous. All 43 participants were female students or master's students, with an average age of 23.5 years. This homogeneity may have influenced the nature of the responses, as gender, age, educational background and professional experience can shape perceptions of digital socialisation. The absence of male participants and of more diverse age groups limits the range of perspectives included in the study. Third, the focus-group interviews may have influenced participants' responses through group dynamics. In focus groups, some participants may dominate the discussion, while others may express fewer ideas or adapt their answers to the opinions already expressed by the group. As a result, some individual perceptions may not have been fully captured. Fourth, the research relies on verbally declared perceptions, not on direct observation of digital behaviour. The study therefore analyses how participants understand and describe digital socialisation, rather than how they actually behave in digital environments. Future research could combine focus groups with individual interviews, questionnaires, digital ethnography or observation of online practices in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of digital socialisation.

Conclusions

Digital socialisation emerges both from the literature and the focus-group interview analysis as a complex, ambivalent and formative process through which individuals communicate, interact, construct relationships, access information and participate in online communities through digital technologies. The participants' responses

indicate a predominantly functional and experiential understanding of the concept: digital socialisation is defined mainly through what it enables in practice — communication, connection, online interaction, accessibility and the overcoming of spatial limits. Although the definitions are not highly theoretical, they capture the essential core of digital socialisation as a form of technology-mediated social participation. The strengths of digital socialisation are clearly visible in the participants' perceptions and are also supported by recent literature. Digital environments facilitate rapid communication, help maintain relationships at a distance, enable access to information and create opportunities for belonging to digital communities. They also support informal learning, identity exploration, participation, creativity and the development of digital competences. In this sense, digital socialisation can expand traditional socialisation by offering new spaces for interaction, collaboration and cultural participation, especially for young people and future teachers who live and learn in hybrid social contexts. At the same time, the weaknesses of digital socialisation are less explicitly formulated by participants, but they can be inferred from both the data and the literature. These weaknesses include online risks, misinformation, privacy vulnerability, dependence on technology, superficial relationships, social comparison, emotional vulnerability and the possible weakening of face-to-face interaction. The absence of references to emotional depth, authenticity, non-verbal communication, empathy and embodied presence suggests that participants implicitly distinguish digital socialisation from face-to-face socialisation by its stronger dependence on mediated communication and weaker dependence on direct personal presence. Therefore, digital socialisation should not be understood as a replacement for face-to-face socialisation, but as a complementary and sometimes problematic extension of it.

From an educational perspective, the research highlight the need for active teacher involvement in guiding digital socialisation. Teachers should not merely encourage the use of digital technologies, but should help students understand the social, ethical, emotional and cognitive implications of digital participation. Their role is to develop

digital literacy, media literacy, critical thinking, ethical communication, emotional balance and responsible digital citizenship. In conclusion, digital socialisation has significant formative potential, but this potential becomes educationally valuable only when it is critically guided, ethically framed and integrated into balanced forms of online and offline social participation.

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