

Technology in Society

Socially isolated and digitally excluded. A qualitative exploratory study of the lives of Roma teenage mothers during the COVID-19 lockdown

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Abstract:	<p>This paper explores the interlinks between multiple layers of exclusion and deprivation of Roma adolescents mothers in the context of COVID-19 pandemic, in order to understand: a) how different types of exclusion (e.g., digital, social, educational) overlap and how are those types of exclusion lived and perceived by teenage mothers; and b) whether and how the COVID-19 pandemic changed existing inequalities in their situation. In our paper, we refer to teenage mothers to describe mothers who gave birth before the age of 18.</p> <p>The study has a qualitative exploratory approach and relies on ten interviews conducted with Roma teenage mothers in peripheral urban areas in Romania during COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in the Spring of 2020. As a theoretical framework, the study employs the Relative Digital Deprivation Theory, (Helsper, 2016) which touches upon three dimensions of digital divides while revealing different markers of agency that young mothers manifest. In our understanding, “agency” is not limited to active agency, but encompasses the “tacit or hidden agency” as well (Sniekers, 2018). Moreover, we relied on Maheshwari’s work (2019) that developed the concept of positioning to understand how individuals’ identities are shaped by different competing discourses (e.g. victimhood and agency).</p> <p>Although from an absolute-objective perspective the results showed these young women as being digitally and socially excluded, from their subjective-relative perspective, with their lives gravitating around their new babies and partners, their exclusion is not perceived as unfair or illogical, but in line with the usual expectations and values of their communities.</p> <p>Unexpectedly, the lockdown period did not have too much of a disturbing effect on their already secluded and hugely marginalized lives (online or offline), although in some cases some changes occurred. Being already socially excluded, they continued living in their micro-universes of their homes in remote, already separated areas, only marginally connected to few parts of the rest of the world via digital technologies, many times restricted in their functionality and usage (i.e., by poor devices, poor connection, financially poor for data services, poor skills).</p> <p>We anticipate the study to have high stakes with regards to policies of social and digital inclusion of (Roma) adolescent mothers, not only by showing the picture of the digital exclusion of a population that is usually missing from digital research, but also by understanding their point of view on their state and by understanding the importance of a valid referent (e.g., more digitally included), which would represent a positive example to motivate them towards making a change.</p>
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Opposed Reviewers:

Highlights

Highlights

- Innovative research of one of the most vulnerable groups in Europe: Roma teenage mothers
- Roma teenage mothers between multiple layers of exclusion in the context of COVID-19 pandemic
- The digital lives (e.g., access, use, skills, benefits and/or risks) of Roma teenage mothers
- A qualitative approach of the *children with children* lives in the digital society

Socially isolated and digitally excluded. A qualitative exploratory study of the lives of Roma teenage mothers during the COVID-19 lockdown

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1. Introduction

In an era when digital exclusion mirrors and deepens social exclusion (Helsper, 2012; Hargittai & Hsieh, 2013; Barbovschi & Fizesan, 2013), studies on digital exclusion of Roma people are still in their beginnings, addressing more the nomadic Roma population (Townsend et al., 2018) or ICT for social inclusion in education for Roma adolescents (Garmendia & Karrera, 2018). One study that maps research on Roma children at the European level shows that they mainly focus on more basic needs (e.g. education, health, housing, civic documentation) than on children's digital lives (Byrne and Szira, 2018). Therefore, the digital lives (e.g. access, usage, skills, benefits or risks) of Roma people in general and Roma children especially go understudied; that is in part because access in these communities is difficult for researchers, another reason being these children are amongst those who also live in severe material deprivation, their living condition preventing their access to electricity, let aside the Internet and digital connectivity (Save the Children Romania, 2019a).

Moreover, teenage mothers already face numerous struggles and burdens, such as disrupted lives, lack of support in accommodating the challenges and living publicly examined lives (Hanna, 2001), caught in a limbo between childhood and enforced adulthood. Their digital exclusion or, more generally, their digital lives are difficult to approach because of their double roles, as children / under 18 years old and as parents.

In this paper we focus on the digital exclusion of one of the most vulnerable groups, where multiple layers of exclusion overlap: that of Roma teenage mothers, arguably rendered more vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic. Describing adolescent mothers' experiences along several inequality lines (i.e. economical, social, digital) is critical to understanding how their agency manifests in constructing their multiple (and often contradictory) identities (e.g. as (still) children, as mothers, as daughters, as partners), as opposed to common images of them as passive, (just) vulnerable beings living at the fringes of society. COVID-19 has acted as a magnifying glass which deepened existing divisions across social groups and strata (Madianou, 2020), Roma population across Europe being especially at risk (FRA, 2020). Therefore understanding how the pandemic has affected one of the most vulnerable categories (i.e. teenage mothers) in asserting their (already) marginal identity is important. In order to understand Roma teenage mothers' digital exclusion/ inclusion during the pandemic times, the article will follow how, by negotiating several identities, across different lines of agency and constraints, the teenage mothers: (1) manifest 'digital uses and skills' and (2) reap the benefits but also the negative effects of internet use. These lines are 'positioned' starting from 'absolute' or 'objective' terms of digital deprivation, taking into account, nonetheless, the 'subjective' and 'relative' form of digital deprivation, as felt and reported by girls (Helsper, 2016).

This article adds a contribution towards a greater diversity and more agentic depiction of teenage mothers, in order to provide a more nuanced comprehension of their lives, uniquely impacted by COVID-19.

1.1. Contextual background: Romanian teenage mothers and Roma situation

The number of teenage mothers in Romania is the highest in the EU, with 2.306 under 15, and 6.848 between 16 and 18 years old (Save the Children, 2019). In Romania, officially Roma count for 3% of the population (INS, 2011). Although we do not have data on the ethnic background of Romanian teenage mothers, various studies about pregnancy and early marriage in Roma population documented these aspects for Roma population. A quarter of teenage girls (12-18 years old) were already in a marriage (with or without papers) and 13% had already given birth to at least one child before having 18 years old shows data for Romanian Roma population (Sandu, 2004; Crai, 2015); similar percentages describe the international situation (FRA, 2014). Notwithstanding existing debates (Oprea, 2005) whether early marriage in Roma communities should be tackled as a 'global concern' and addressed by policy regulation or it is rather a cultural issue, there is an agreement upon the interconnection between the cultural and the socioeconomic factors (e.g. poorer household,

less educated rural area, Hotchkiss et al., 2016) which creates the circle of marginalisation in which these girls are kept and also on the fact that they reinforce the status quo (Crai, 2015, Sandu, 2004, FRA, 2014).

Moreover, according to European Union Agency for Human Rights (FRA, 2014, p.35), 75% of the Roma female drop out school before the age of 16 and a percentage of 22 school age Roma children do not attend school in Romania compared to an average of 3% of the non-Roma children, a situation described as “educational poverty” - Save the Children Organisation Report (2016, p.8). Educational poverty refers to: a) the lack of opportunities which hinders children from gaining the necessary knowledge and skills needed to succeed in a world of permanent change (cognitive skills); b) the lack of access needed to establish and maintain other social relationships and to develop themselves (non-cognitive skills); and c) the lack of opportunities for cultural, leisure and sport activities. The main reasons for school dropout are: the long commute (from their homes to the public schools), lack of accessible public transportation, needing to work to support their families, or caring for younger members of their families. [45]. Furthermore, these children are amongst those who also live in severe material deprivation, with 32% (of all Romanian children) being under the poverty threshold (Save the Children Romania, 2019b) and facing social exclusion (Florian, Toc, 2020).

Reports of the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the worsening state for children coming from vulnerable and marginalized social groups, especially Roma communities (FRA, 2020). A recent survey (Agency “impreama”, June 2020) found that the Roma were one of the most vulnerable social groups affected by the social lockdown due to several reasons: financial crisis - 26% of them have occasional or seasonal incomes (these jobs were lost during the lockdown); poor living conditions - 36% are living in households with more than 5 persons and in very small spaces; 19% live in overcrowded households with a surface of less than 25 square meters and no utilities (including water). All these conditions represented real challenges for 2 months of lockdown, without needing to also accommodate the digital transformation of their lives - 68% of the Roma population declared in 2018 that they do not know or know very little how to use a computer and 37% did not have access to the internet within their household.

2. Theoretical and analytical framing

The theoretical framework includes the existing knowledge on the interlink between socioeconomic and digital divides, in order to illuminate modalities of agency which exist within (or even in spite of) constraints and exclusion. In order to explain our data, we will refine the digital divide framework by using the specific theory of relative digital deprivation (Helsper, 2016) that switches the point of view from an external instance toward the subjects themselves. In line with this emic approach, rather than favouring an independence-oriented discourse of agency, this article points to instances where empowerment and agency occurs in subtle and routine practices of vulnerable groups of girls and young women.

2.1. Digital inequalities - social inequalities

Building on pioneer research on digital divide which started in the '90 (Gunkel, 2003; Wilson et al., 2019; DiMaggio et al., 2004) and advanced due to the proliferation of mobile devices (Vincent & Haddon, 2018), Hargittai (2002) was the first to propose a multilevel understanding of digital divide beyond mere access, in order to include a second level, defined as divide in digital skills and usage. Later on, a third level of digital divide was added to emphasize the differences in benefits in real life that the use of technology produces (Helsper & van Deursen, 2015). Although these three levels are seen as continuous, in fact the last level is substantially different, as it focuses on the output of the digital technology use and not on what makes it possible (Robinson et al., 2020). Still looking at outputs, recent research has focused not only on benefits, but also on negative consequences of digital use, namely the perceived digital overuse (Gui & Buchi, 2019; see also Scheerder et al., 2019).

Studies that looked for predictive factors of digital inequalities revealed the role of sociodemographic variables that traditionally were linked with socioeconomic inequalities, such as age, gender, educational level and income (van Deursen et al., 2017). We will briefly discuss here the most important for our study, namely those linked with the economic class, gender, ethnicity and education. Thus, economic class remains a clear dividing factor (for access, skills and usage) even in developed countries with universal access to the internet (Robinson et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2019), those better situated economically using the internet more for capital enhancing activities, whereas those with a lower economic capital use it more for entertaining (DiMaggio et al., 2004). Moreover, the type of device used for accessing the internet matters (mobile only versus a broader, but more expensive, repertoire of devices), influencing and being influenced by the digital skills and having an impact on further user benefits (Correa et al., 2018; Scheerder et al., 2019; Robinson et al., 2020; Vincent & Haddon, 2018; Garmendia & Karrera, 2019).

Furthermore, gender has a more sinuous relationship with digital inequalities. Whereas the digital gap linked with the

internet access closed in the majority of developed countries, it still is an issue in emerging economies or developing countries (Robinson et al., 2020, Bhandary, 2019). But, as Bhandary (2019) shows, the gender digital gap is not entirely due to unequal distribution of technology among male and women, but mirrors the broader gender gap from those countries that is shaped by the cultural (e.g. religiosity) and social factors.

Ethnicity matters for digital inequalities in those societies in which different ethnic groups hold already unequal positions in society (Robinson et al., 2020). Garmendia and Karrera (2019) studying Roma adolescents from Spain depict a rather grim picture - with significant infringement of rights, for all three Ps investigated: provision, participation and protection- nonetheless, concluding that “*the use of ICTs can contribute to empowering Roma/Gitano adolescents*” (but it does not do it for the moment). Other studies investigating the specific ethnic group of Roma travellers showed how social exclusion can pair with digital inclusion, when users reinforce their own specific culture through the digital communication use, in the same time use digital technology to selectively integrate into the mainstream society (Townsend et al., 2018).

Finally, education is important at all three levels: access, skills and benefits (Robinson et al., 2020, Gui & Gerosa, forthcoming). Thus, not only that higher education is associated with more access, skills, and benefits (Scheerder et al., 2017), but is also associated with the avoidance of negative outcomes (Gui & Buchi, 2019, Gui & Gerosa, forthcoming). Conversely, being digitally excluded impacts the educational trajectory (Robinson et al, 2020; Garmendia & Karrera, 2019).

Though acknowledging the compound nature of digital exclusion, the majority of study choose to focus on just one aspect of inequalities that pairs with digital exclusion, on the detrimental of a broader, intersectional approach. There are exceptions; for example, Garmendia and Karrera (2019) analysed the majority of the disadvantages mentioned above and found that Roma girls are more digitally disadvantaged than boys, for all three dimensions: girls have access to a smartphone but they have to share it with their mothers (provision); their digital lives are more controlled by parents as a form of ‘protection’ (and latter, as they married, they automatically enter under husband’s sphere of digital control/ protection); subsequently, they have a smaller digital participation because of their reduced or limited presence on social media.

In order to overcome and supplement individualistic approaches, Helsper (2016) proposed the relative digital deprivation (RDD) theory to understand the dynamism (or lack thereof) of the phenomenon, which could further inform more efficient, structural, non-individualistic policy. Her approach starts from distinguishing between absolute and relative, objective and subjective digital inequalities, while introducing the key element of a ‘referent’ (individual or collective) against which said inequalities are assessed. Moreover, in switching from absolute-objective views on digital deprivation (i.e. what one has) to the relative-subjective view (i.e. what one feels about one has in comparison with others’), Helsper (2016) shows that three filters are important: expectancy (i.e. what is the expected value of digital technology that is assessed in relationship with the referent), legitimacy (i.e. how unfair and illogic these situations appear to the deprived people that also introduce the idea of being aware of their state) and capability (their perceived abilities to fill the gap that keep them deprived, this being shaped by the necessary level of similarity between them and the referent).

2.2. Agency of adolescent mothers

Several division lines construct teenage mothers (TM) as powerless and passive, such as: disadvantaged backgrounds characterized by poverty and unemployment as one of the factors contributing to adolescent motherhood (Breheny & Stephens, 2010); presumed lack of mothering skills and education (Hurley, 2010) and them being considered physically and emotionally unprepared for adult responsibilities and raising children (Hurley, 2010). Other studies (Pryce & Samuels, 2010) have focused on the inherent constraints related to young / teenage mothers being forced to transition towards adult identities, often without support. This article adopts Sniekers’ s (2018) broad understanding of agency which includes “tacit or hidden agency” (Sniekers, 2018, p. 1079). Her perspective builds on Mahmood’s (2001; 2004) interpretation of the concept which, in opposition with ideas of active resistance to oppression and autonomy (and challenged as such by various scholars, e.g. Mahmood, 2004; McNay, 2000; Payne, 2012), is more embedded in daily life practices. In line with other research (Payne, 2012; Valentine, 2011), Sniekers also contends that resistance-type views of agency which are morally acceptable tend to ascribe more agency to privileged children as opposed to disenfranchised ones. In the case of teenage mothers, the tension between constructing them as both vulnerable and deviant (since they are perceived as children raising children, cf Yardley, 2008) might prevent the construction of them as agentic subjects, navigating their own social circumstances.

However, some studies from young mothers’ perspectives have identified motivation, perseverance, responsibility and maturity (Ponsford, 2011), as markers of agency. In an attempt to mitigate these tensions, Cense and Ruard Ganzevoort

(2019) use the concept of narrative agency in order to illustrate how teenage mothers navigate constraints related to social norms and stigma in their construction of meaning around their identities. Finally, following a feminism tradition which pays attention to different power structures, Maheshwari (2019) uses the concept of positioning to understand how individuals' identities are shaped by different competing discourses (e.g. victimhood and agency). Notwithstanding the difficulties that adolescent mothers face, this article focuses on aspects of agency in relation to specific constraints (related to different types of divides) in understanding their experiences in the COVID-19 context. Adopting a qualitative approach, talking to these adolescent mothers about their own perspectives, enables us to understand how they assign meaning to their own experiences and how they construct themselves through the means available to them, while navigating different types of disadvantages. Bringing together concepts of agency, gender and different inequalities enables an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 1991) in order to illuminate different modalities of agency adolescent mothers rely on.

2.3. COVID-19 times and the worsening of existing divisions

Most researchers agree that we live in a postdigital time where one cannot clearly distinguish between the 'real' and the 'digital' world (Coeckelbergh, 2020). However, studies show that the importance gained by digital technology during the COVID-19 time deepened the social inequalities (Robinson et al., 2020) leading to 'second-order disaster' (Madianou, 2020), which worsened the situation of already deprived populations (limiting their access to e-schooling; e-health services etc.) by adding new specific problems for them.

Beaunoyer and colleagues (2020) show how digital inequalities enhanced the vulnerability to COVID-19 of those already disadvantaged - because of their lack of (e)health literacy and reduced use of e-services, because of their lack of alternatives for essential activities (e.g. the possibility of a remote job), and because they are more vulnerable to the repercussions of the subsequent financial crisis. Moreover, the pandemic has deepened the digital inequalities already in place with regards to technical means, autonomy of use, social support network and experience (Beaunoyer et al., 2020). Finally, although there are some papers which praised digital technology for helping children overcome the COVID-19 crisis, they all make a clear distinction between children -in need for help- and caregivers -who are advised how to provide this help (Goldschmidt, 2020). Any study, to the best of our knowledge, does not approach the situation in which the caregivers are children, so they are in both positions: presumably in need of help and in charge of providing it.

3. Methodology

3.1. Access to the field and its challenges

Due to the specificities of our research subjects highlighted above, the mere access to Roma teenage mothers was difficult. It required overcoming two layers of distrust: to enter the more or less (im)permeable border of the community and to obtain young mothers' trust by reassuring them that the discussions/ interviews would not negatively impact the wellbeing of their children (as the unofficial and unruled situations of these teenage mothers represent a source of permanent anxiety about the state forcibly taking their babies). This being an exploratory research and due to the above mentioned difficulties, we did not aim for a large sample, but limited the study to one municipality, medium-sized city situated in South-Western part of Romania, easily accessible to the researchers, and with which the researchers had previously collaborated in other projects. Moreover, we relied on the social mediator and the school mediator of the municipality for Roma, both well-known in the community, being present in their day to day lives to facilitate solving several domestic and administrative issues the teenagers and their families encountered (e.g. ID cards, settlement contracts, birth certificates, state allowance, school dropout, training and "second chance" school system etc.). They firstly granted us access to the database of the Social Service municipality (following an official requirement) for identifying the cases and later joined the researcher during the visits.

3.2. Participants and sample description

The teenage mothers were approached based on the November 2019 database of the Social Service municipality, where 17 cases were registered. The database was institutionally requested for this particular research and it was used only for undertaking official steps in order to arrange the visits. Of the 17 adolescent mothers identified together with the Roma social mediator, only 10 were found at the address indicated (the others had run away, moved with their partners in other places, were not found at home or refused to participate, out of fear of losing their child to foster care state institutions). A detailed description of the sample can be found in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 here.

3.3. Ethical procedure

Ethical aspects related to researching vulnerable groups and vulnerable groups of children in particular, were considered of utmost importance (Barbovski, Green & Vandoninck, 2013). The formal consent of the parents (as guardians of teenage mothers), as well as the consent of the young mothers were obtained. The research aims and procedure were explained before each interview.

Because of their extreme vulnerability and our main focus being their relationship with digital technology in their capacity as teenage mothers, the issue of teenage mothers' ethnicity was not brought into discussion by the researchers. As such, their self-declaration of belonging to Roma ethnic group was not directly discussed during the interviews. But according to the social mediator and school mediator, they were all registered as Roma and belonged to marginalized urban areas and communities that are 'marked' as Roma communities. As Roma population is still stigmatised in Romania we wanted to avoid additional stigma (as our main research interest was already a sensitive topic). Nonetheless, the subject of ethnicity was indirectly touched when we address questions about segregation, discrimination and their relations with the authorities (including hospitals and birth, schools and municipality) and one participant explicitly mentioned she still spoke Romani language.

3.4. Data collection and analysis

The research method used to collect the data was the semi-structured interview, considered the best to accommodate the exploratory nature of our study, the vulnerability of the studied population and the special conditions in which the interviews took place (after the lockdown, but still during the pandemic, in conditions of social distancing that limited the attempt to have more ethnographic approaches). The interviews were taken during June-July 2020, at the residence of the teenage mothers. The interviews were audio recorded (underlining the purpose of the research and their anonymity). The duration of the interviews was between 30 and 50 minutes. Each interview was transcribed, anonymised and analysed using the thematic analysis method (Terry et al., 2017). In accordance with the ethical guidance, the audio files of the interviews have been destroyed once the transcription was finished; the transcripts of the interviews in the anonymised version are kept on hardware storage devices.

The coding scheme was developed both deductively, based on the theoretical framework (e.g. considering the three types of digital divide and the RDD theory), and inductively, when a specific topic not considered previously popped up from interviews or when we dropped out some themes that not occurred during the interviews. For developing the coding scheme, the researchers met two times: first for developing the deductive initial schema, then, after each of the researchers coded two interviews, for discussing the suitability of the initial scheme and for adjusting it with the new themes. Another series of meetings followed after each interview was coded by two researchers and were meant to confront the results and negotiate the incongruences between the results. Because of the small number of interviews and of the exploratory nature of the research, we did not calculate intercoder reliability index, but discussed any incongruence and agreed upon a common interpretation.

The main themes of the interviews were: their situation (i.e. social, economic, educational, personal) before and during the lockdown period (in Romania, this was between 16th of March - 15th of May 2020), their relation with the school/ education and personal perspective about the online education system, uses of technologies (access, connections, devices, applications, social networks/ platforms, free time), exclusion/ inclusion (relation with the community, institutions), perception of their motherhood and youth in relation to their own personal development, the use of technologies and internet in relation with their children and/ or family, the impact of internet on their lives (the window out of "the isolation").

3.5. Analytical framework

As the analytical framework, we use Helsper's (2016) relative digital deprivation theory and Ponsford' (2011) markers of agency. We started by describing adolescent mothers' absolute and objective and their relative (context-specific, that encompasses the COVID-19 times) and subjective states of digital exclusion, following the three layers of digital divide described above. Then we looked for signs / occurrences of motivation, perseverance, responsibility and maturity as markers of their agency as adolescent mothers. We employed a thematic analysis approach to closely examine the data in order to distinguish topics, ideas and patterns of meaning around issues of digital divides, markers of agency and negotiating identity. The analytical approach was consistent with Maheshwari's concept of positioning (2019) because it

favoured teenage mothers' views on their situation, thus enabling us to detach important narratives. Finally, we discussed the link between those two spheres explaining how RDD impacts their level of agency as TM and how this defining status impacts their RDD perceptions.

4. Results

4.1. Absolute - Objective level of digital inequalities

Building on the framework of three levels of digital divide, we will present our data according to: 1. girls' access to digital technology, 2. skills and usage of digital technology and 3. the output (i.e. benefits they reap and (informed by the work of Gui & Buchi, 2019), avoidance of negative output in their offline life by using digital technology.

Access. Smartphones were in the majority of cases the devices used for connecting to the internet, mostly for personal consumption (e.g. navigating social media). Just TM5 (in her house from Austria) and TM9 had a smart TV (they did not call it as such, but they mentioned being connected to the internet and watching YouTube on it), although all of them mentioned TV sets as important devices in their lives. The internet connection was rather poor (TM6, TM7, TM9), because of lack of interest from the internet providers to cover those disadvantaged areas, despite Romania being a well connected country (DESI, 2020). TM2 mentioned that they have had GSM signal only since last year when one of the internet providers built an antenna in the area; previously they had to climb a hill to have internet signal on the phone. Even at the time of the interview, TM3 had her phone stuck with tape on the window to catch some very poor signal, only possible on a prepaid sim-card. Paying for connection was another issue (TM2, TM6). Others had their boyfriends pay for subscription (TM6) and helped other family members connect through their Hotspot connections. Four girls mentioned an internet cable connection that is further routed as WiFi (TM10, TM9, TM3 and TM1).

The functionality and efficiency of smartphones varied across their economic restrictions. A perpetual fear for many of them was the danger of having the devices broken, especially because of children's careless use (e.g. TM2 and TM9), which in some cases constituted a major restriction in their lives. For instance, because for TM6 the device was the only connection with her boyfriend, she took extra-care of it and kept it in the wardrobe, sacrificing the mobile feature of the device for the hardware integrity. Other devices mentioned were tablets (TM1, TM4 had some in the past) and laptop (for TM9; but the laptop was not funcțional/ installed, as all family members had smartphones, deemed sufficient for their usage).

Uses and skills. All respondents (except TM3) keenly claimed they knew their smartphone settings and technical features, but their usage was in fact quite limited. *Yes, I know how to use the smartphone. I know everything about my own!* (TM6). The majority of the girls used the internet for entertainment (heavily shaped by their type of access, having unlimited data/ cable connection allowing for more view time on Youtube, TikTok, Facebook or even content for young children) and social connection (connection with their former colleagues, families and friends, their former life as children). Others used the device for maintaining their relationship with partners (TM4, TM5, TM6, TM9, TM10). They were rather passive users, despite publishing from time to time content on their FB accounts: watching videos, other people's posts, watching TV programmes and listening to music. In two cases, this practice was somehow restricted by their partners, out of jealousy, as it was the case with TM2 who did not have her own FB account anymore and TM9 (in her case, religion also played a role). Nevertheless, both managed to circumvent these veiled restrictions, TM2 using her husband's account for publishing content with the baby and herself, and TM9 by avoiding to post content with herself alone, and publishing pictures with her children. Some knew how to manage security settings (TM8, TM6), especially in the case of TM6 who experienced harassment (from her former partner / child's father) and cyberbullying (from unknown people). TM6 has declared she had several Fb accounts as she used to lose the passwords. Afterwards, she started noting the password on a piece of paper.

The diversity of the use of technology for social connection appeared to be shaped by their offline situation. For example, TM7 went online for getting parenting advice from her mother who lived in another city; TM6 was in touch with her remote boyfriend and TM5, especially during the lockdown period, used technology heavily to keep in touch with her child who was in Romania, whereas she was in Austria. Even for those who were separated from family, they still used digital technology, strengthening and supplementing daily offline connections (with family and friends) or for social validation (e.g. TM6 who used to accept all friend requests for getting more 'like' and 'adore', but ended up being harassed by some online friends).

Of all respondents, TM4 had some of the most active and diverse online practices. She posted 6-7 times daily on her FB account (which she shares with her boyfriend) pictures and videos with her and her baby, had already a second TikTok account on which she created and published content, used the internet for online shopping, online games (for relaxation) and following social cases on FB, trying to help as much as she can: *I see on FB poor people, people in need, who need basic stuff, medicines, clothes and I help when I can* (TM4). From a relative perspective, helping others can be seen as a sign of empowerment.

Using the internet and devices (tablets and smartphones) for learning new skills was more accessible and with a more positive impact for those who experienced foreign educational systems (TM5, TM8, TM9). *When I was with the German teacher, he had a very big tablet. He explained to me in German and the tablet translated for me so I could understand him; then I answered him back in Romanian and the tablet translated everything in German. This is how we understood each other. Otherwise, I could not say a word* (TM9). Learning online occurred also for TM2, 6, 7, 10 in the form of watching tutorials on 'How to' (e.g. make-up, hair-styling, repairing). These skills acquired from the use of the internet and devices made them consider future jobs or professions in these fields which needed not specialized training or education (i.e. returning to school).

Some of the girls used social media and other platforms or applications for online shopping, even if they did not have their own bank account or any knowledge about e-banking, or did not even possess a card. They could easily find different things for their babies (some from the commercials on FB newsfeed TM6, TM7; some from specific sites, TM8), but did not have the skills to choose critically (by reading terms, product specifications or other customers' reviews). They made the order by using postal payment (hand in hand - money for product) as a form of lack of trust in the online services: *If it comes, it comes! I put the money away in the wardrobe* (the same place where she keeps her smartphone) *and wait to come for 5-6 days. If it doesn't come, then I spend the money!* (TM6). The others were either financially limited therefore could not afford shopping (neither offline nor online), or reluctant because of past bad experiences and lack of skills to fix the problem (TM5).

Most of them used the internet in order to keep their babies occupied, which allowed them to have some free time for themselves or for their daily household chores (e.g. TM1, TM7, TM6, TM9).

Benefits & negative outputs. Most of the benefits they harvested from the internet were linked to their feeling of being socially connected and validated as young mothers (e.g. they bragged about how many 'likes' they obtained at pictures with their babies); in some cases this balanced the shame they sometimes felt as teenagers mothers (TM8). TM5 stood out as she just seldom published online pictures she made, but she printed, framed and hanged them on the walls, for private consumption (which brought her another form of validation, i.e. being in charge with embellishing her home). Learning benefits occurred in some cases: TM5 and TM8 mentioned learning foreign languages. Others learned from online tutorials bricolage tricks or how to do make-up or nail painting (having the nails done was a status sign in their groups, but it was expensive to have it done by professionals; some even considered learning it for later monetisation, e.g. TM8 looked for jobs / training online).

There were also some negative outputs reported. TM6 reported being a victim of revenge porn: her ex-boyfriend, the father of the child, published fake/ edited pictures with her face on a naked body. She acted and threatened him that she will report to the police and finally he deleted the pictures. TM9 had the most critical stance about how the internet impacted her life. She regretted her early marriage (not the two children, though) for which she blamed the affordability in connection with the internet: *I destroyed my life because of the internet. Because I chatted online with him and ended up being married. My father and my mother were against these chats and the only time my father slapped me was because of this, but I kept going on. Facebook is the worst because it tempts you to endless chats. I should have continued my education.* (TM9)

4.2. Relative - Subjective level of digital inequalities

In line with the relative digital deprivation theory that frames our research, we looked to identify the referents against whom TMs assess their situation and to understand if during the COVID-19 times these 'referents' changing caused a shift in their situation. None of them mentioned any external (out of the family) referent to whom they would look up to and want to emulate with regards to using digital technologies. The TMs did sometimes mention siblings as being more digitally skilled as they were (e.g. TM3 asks her younger sister for help with social media whenever she needs), or parents (but only for some specific online activities, as did TM9 when she praised her father for being very good at an online game that they play together), or the partner (TM5 for instance use the learning app that her partner installed for her). But any of these mentions did not meet in fact the criteria Helsper highlighted, especially the second one, that supposedly the deprived person really values the way in which the referent uses digital technology (2016, p.237).

The TMs in our sample were in general satisfied with their own level of skills and usage, some of their discontents being linked to access, specifically from their smartphones. TM6 for example, although grateful for her current Huawei device that was so important in her romantic relationship, longed for a bigger screen: *I would like to have a nice phone that allows for better video calls, not those small-screen phones* (TM6). However, she was not prone to do something to mitigate this access gap. A special case was in this regard TM3: not only that she did not have a good internet connection where she lived with her partner (and she was obliged to stick her phone on the window), but she was left with an old, broken phone when her partner took hers. Officially he appropriated her phone because he would need one while going out for work, but in fact it was due to him being jealous of her Facebook usage. She kept urging him to give her phone

back (because having a phone and a degree of agency over her communication was a sign of independence and a level up from the child-status, as her father also controlled her in respect with this), but he postponed the moment of getting her a new device. Her situation was a downgrade from her previous one when she was at her parents' home (and the fact that her sister mocked her about the phone did not help her to cope with the situation). Still, she did not have an external reference to look up to, but a previous better situation.

TM6 was the only one who, changing the reference, positively changed her attitudes about the use of digital technology in the COVID-19 time. Thus, witnessing and helping his younger brother with online schooling (he used Zoom) during the lockdown, she got to reconsider the idea of returning to school, especially in an online version. She reckoned that the online education would fit her as she could find some two or three hours to learn from home, during night or when her daughter slept.

Another point of inflection in their media use during the COVID-19 times was to be found for some TMs in their forceful growing up reflected by their switch from watching cartoons to watching news. Most of them mentioned they enjoyed watching cartoons together with their children or alone or with their younger (sometimes teenager) siblings (TM5, TM4, TM7, TM3, TM6). Nevertheless, some of them were ambivalent towards such childish pleasure, and their partners' interest in news provided the 'referent' towards which they aspired, as a confirmation of their full maturation. If in normal times they would have lived in this tension between the inner childhood and the external imposed maturity expected from them as mothers, during the pandemic times, the need to understand what was going on turned them towards news (TM3, TM5, TM7). TM3 is an example for this idea, especially because the lockdown overlapped with the moment she gave birth (important turning point in her life). Therefore, in order to present herself as an adult, she emulated her husband's media consumption habits that did not fit her yet: *I started watching the news even when he was out and when he came back home I was telling him: "I watched the news today" (laughing). And then he would ask "And what it was about?". "Nothing... they only talked about the pandemic"* (TM3). From her discourse it seems she was not yet able to fully understand the news or to have an interest in it, but adopted this ritual as a maturation sign.

In a different situation, TM5 fully engaged with the news during the lockdown period as she was very interested in learning when the borders will open for her to come to Romania to see her baby. Irrespective of changing in referents, for most of them, the COVID time represented a period of accumulated frustrations especially with regards to their forced isolation in overcrowded houses. The disruption was sensed strongly by those who were separated from their partners (TM6), children (TM5) or other members of the family (mothers and sisters TM7) or friends (TM4). In this context, they heavily used social media for meeting their needs for socializing or just to keep themselves busy: *I posted more selfies and made more videos with my baby and posted on TikTok because I was bored* (TM4).

4.3. Markers of agency - negotiating the TM status

Although none of the TMs was willing to have a child (some taking active steps toward this aim), they did not manifest regrets for becoming mothers. The only one to consider abortion was TM2, but she did not have sufficient money for paying such a medical service before the pandemic, so she kept the baby. Because of severe deprivation, only few of them benefitted from specialised medical supervision during their pregnancy and only on specific occasions (e.g. confirmation of pregnancy, one being victim of a car accident during the pregnancy - TM2, or premature birth TM1, TM6). They had less control over or knowledge of their own body; for instance, they were not aware of their pregnancy until it was obvious (TM2, TM6) and for some, their mothers recognized their condition before them. Their sexual education was therefore completely missing (i.e. they do not use birth control pills, they did not mention any medical visit to family planning or to the family physician to counsel them), partially due to the lack of such subject in the Romanian curricula at lower secondary school, when in general they dropped out school. They delegated the responsibility to their partner (*He knows better*, TM3) or they did not know how to handle the situation and were too ashamed to ask.

Despite not having any obvious negative experience with the medical staff (although this happens frequently, as TMs reported in their situation, e.g. TM1, TM2, TM6), the birth experience was traumatizing for many of them mainly because of their body not being prepared for giving birth. Therefore they were not willing to have any more babies (at least of the time of the interviews). Although physically they were not prepared, they already had enough knowledge on raising children, as they were used to caring for younger brothers and sisters, or for other members of the family (TM1, TM6, TM7). They had become children with children before giving birth to their own. This attitude was powerfully expressed by TM7 when recalling how she breastfed a baby left by his mother in the hospital. In spite of her poverty and poor social status, TM7 openly expressed her bitterness about abandoning the new born baby in the hospital (a common practice in Romania, where social services do not help efficiently these young mothers, or because of social stigma). Aware of the women's condition in general, she wished her second baby to be a boy, too. *I do not want her to be afflicted/ tormented as we are* (TM7).

We were interested in their projection for the upcoming 5 - 10 years. They found this exercise difficult and could not imagine themselves in what they perceived as a distant horizon. Living in this suspended condition between childhood and adulthood, without a job most of them coveted, their only hope was linked to their babies and the new family welfare.

I do not see myself anyhow. I never thought of this yet” (TM2); *I don't know what to answer to this question. I really do not know what the future will be like. At most, I wish for my boy to have, to have his own house here (in Austria) or in Romania*” (TM5). For some of them, the current concern to escape from abusive or careless relations (TM2, TM6, TM8) interrupted any long term vision.

For TM7 entering the ‘marriage’ was an active decision, as a way of escaping from her father that used to take her begging. She despised her previous life and manifested a total commitment to her new social status within the community and her family that provided her a new form of agency, freedom and control over her own person. *I am not a girl anymore! I am a woman! I was a girl before, maiden when I got married!* (TM7). In spite of this attitude, their statute as a woman was fragile. TM3 recognized that she still wanted to cuddle in her mother’s arms, while TM4 said *I see myself as a baby girl, during winter, being in bed at warmth.*

Some of them had to deal with social stigma, especially in school (TM8 dropped out because she was afraid her colleagues would laugh at her); on the contrary, TM3 went at school during her entire pregnancy, just before the lockdown, but she acknowledged not being the first to become mother in her class, therefore entering a situation which was already acceptable. A similar situation was reported by TM6 and TM7 who went to school pregnant and admitted that some colleagues made jokes.

In these conditions, for many of them, the use of social media platforms represented a way to emancipation (from previous families) and for constructing themselves as young mothers. But not all of them shared this view and TM9 openly dismissed this misleading type of “opposing agency” (Sniekers, 2018): *because of the internet I got married (...) I have a younger sister of 11 years old. I do not agree with her to do what I have done. She has TikTok, but not Facebook!* (TM9). By imposing this restriction on her younger sister's internet use, TM9 manifested responsibility toward the use of Facebook. When asked by the researcher if she longed for her FB account, TM3 also claimed a responsible use of the internet, despite the control and imposed restriction from her partner and previously from her father. TM5 also manifested responsibility towards her boy’s screen time, in spite of being a heavy user herself, voicing concerns about eye damage, concern that circulated among her group of Romanian teenager mothers from Austria.

5. Discussion

This paper aimed to understand the digital exclusion and its interlinks with other forms of exclusion and deprivation for Roma teenage mothers in an intersectional pattern (Crenshaw, 1991). First, it looked into various layers of exclusions and if/how these changed due to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on how teenage mothers negotiate their double status as mothers and (still) children (Sniekers, 2018) with the help of digital technologies. Some official attempts (Save the Children, 2019, 2016) to address their precarious situation, have assessed it externally, but usually failed because they ignored these young mothers’ voices, disempowering them even more. To overcome this problem, our paper adopted Maheshwari’s concept of positioning (2019) and favoured teenage mothers’ views on their situation. Moreover, we used the relative digital deprivation theory (Helsper, 2016) that also argues for switching from an absolute and objective perspective, to a relative and subjective vision. As Roma teenage mothers represent an under researched group, we choose to firstly describe their current situation of digital exclusion against the three levels of digital divide (Helsper & van Deursen, 2015) and then to complement it with their subjective-relative vision on the issue. Though most of the studies consider teenage mothers in a victimhood paradigm, acknowledging their precarious situation. On the contrary, in line with our commitment to give them a voice, we highlighted not only their opposing, but their tacit agency (Sniekers, 2018), that is embedded in their everyday practices.

Thus, the data described a picture of teenage mothers economically and socially excluded, though well integrated in their families (previous and/or current). Their current socioeconomic situation was shaped by their ethnicity, as most of them lived in ghetto-like conditions, without basic utilities. In this context, their first level of digital deprivation (lack of access or restriction in it) was totally expected. Subsequently, their digital skills and usages were basic. Although some would explain this by their low level of education, digital technology was not present in the schools they attended; with one exception, they did not report having used digital technology when in school. Therefore, the expectation that without them dropping out of school their digital skills would increase is non-realistic. This result was partially expected because in general, Romanian schools fall behind in teaching digital skills (DESI, 2020), but also because the schools in marginal areas are usually poorly equipped, both in material and human resources. Thus, not reaping many (or any) capital enhancing benefits from their digital use confirms previous literature on digital exclusion.

However, their relative perception of their situation was not as negative as the objective and absolute picture drawn above. Although sometimes they felt the stigma for their status as teenage mothers, this model was well rooted in their social groups, their mothers and their mother-in-law having had their first children at an early age (sometimes our adolescent mothers have siblings the same age as their own children). Dropping out of school at a young age was also common in their groups, especially for girls after giving birth and they are fully aware that this hindered any further chances of employment: *Graduating only 8 classes you can do nothing* (TM8).

Not having a proper ‘referent’ Helsper (2016) against which to assess their own situation and towards which to aspire, they were rather content with their level of digital inclusion (e.g. they were if not happy, at least content with their devices and consider them fully functional if they could make (video) calls and have access to Facebook), with all the nuances mentioned above. They used digital technology in a way that they perceive as meaningful, for them as adolescents, giving them social validation, and as mothers (when technology is used for baby-sitting to trade some free time for themselves).

Although from an absolute and objective perspective the results show them digitally and socially excluded, from their subjective-relative perspective, with their lives gravitating around their new babies and partners, their exclusion was not perceived as unfair or illogical, but in line with the usual expectations and values of their communities.

Unexpectedly, the lockdown period did not have too much of a disturbing effect on their lives (online or offline), though in some cases it imposed some changes. Being already socially excluded, they continued living their micro-universe of the home where they could manifest agency in all the daily chores, from nursing their babies or younger siblings, to digitally parenting them or embarking on the new role as head of their home. They did use more social media during this time, but this brought them more validation as young mothers. Despite expectations that the crisis will impact them on a long term perspective (Madianou, 2020), from a short term perspective, the COVID-19 pandemic did not have a special effect in deepening the existing inequalities. This could be explained by their previous extreme exclusion, but also by their suspended status, between childhood and adulthood, not (yet) on the labour market.

Two new situations in their digital media consumption arose nonetheless during the pandemic. Firstly, for some of them, those globally disturbing times represented an opportunity to link themselves cognitively with the external world through news consumption, which further enabled an expression of their newly acquired maturity. This externally forced maturation joined their inner wish to be seen as responsible adults, exiting the paternalistic view of fathers and later on husbands (in this regard, our results are in line with those of Garmendia & Karrera, 2019). Secondly, in just one case (worth mentioning nonetheless), the remote/ online forced schooling of a younger brother changed TM6 perspective on the opportunities offered by digital technologies and she started considering the idea of getting back to online schooling, which fitted her motherhood status. In this respect, changing their reference and showing them the opportunities digital technology could offer for their specific situation represented, as Helsper shows (2016), a first step towards changing something about their own digital exclusion.

5.1. Limitations and future directions

The research was conducted in a specific period of time (COVID time) that moved the social research to the online. Nonetheless, some groups/ subjects are difficult to reach thereby (i.e. digital exclusion); so a real life, face to face encounter was in some cases necessary. But whereas the nature of the research would benefit probably more from an ethnographic, long term approach, the social distance requirement did not allow it. Therefore, given this novel and challenging context and for an exploratory first stage collecting data through semi structured interviews was considered suitable; however, more long term, in depth, ethnographic studies are needed on the topic. Furthermore, if the sample was considered enough for an exploratory research, a more extended study that would compare the situations of young mothers in rural versus urban areas, or the situations of those living in very closed communities versus those living in more open communities, or even the situations of Roma teenage mother from Romania with Roma teenage mothers from other countries would enrich considerably the understanding of the topic, and consequently, the ways to address it. Further research should increase the number of teenage mothers and/or extend to other social/ non-ethnic groups. As education represents a special theme that influences not only the use of media and internet, but also their life expectancy and quality of life, a deeper understanding of how online media environments may become a source of information and learning for teenage mothers, should be approached. Educational policies may be proposed in order to support teenage mothers to navigate constraints related to the social norms, to gain their independence and to find proper employment.

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House						X			X	
Municipality apartment (block of flats)		X			X					
Municipality rooms (old houses, old barracks)	X		X	X			X	X		
Income situation										
Welfare benefits (motherhood allowance/ child allowance)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Partner's paid job			X		X					
Parents' job		X		X		X	X	X	X	X
Education										
In school			graduated 8 classes							9th grade (high school)
In school at the time of the child birth				graduated 8 classes (not in school now)		graduated 8 classes (not in school now)	graduated 8 classes (not in school now)	graduated 8 classes (not in school now)	graduated 5 classes in Romania, 2 in Germany (not in school)	
Drop out	dropout 5th grade, at the age of 12	dropout 5th grade, at the age of 12				dropout graduated 6 or 7 classes				
Place of residence										
Main city										X
City's suburbs (more than 10 km)			X			X	X			
City's remote neighborhoods, old town	X	X		X	X			X	X	