

Digital mediation and family climate reported by children in Spain, Italy, and Portugal

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Abstract

Considering parental mediation as a dual process that starts with the child and varies according to their age and online activities, this article examines digital socialization in the broader context of family communication. Based on the EU Kids Online questionnaire (2017-2019) which surveyed children (9-16 years old) in 19 countries, and on previous pan-European studies, the article explores results from Spain, Italy and Portugal in a comparative perspective among them and with then 19 countries average. In the three Latin countries, in line with the average, safety, support and family communication are more highlighted by children than digital socialization, which is marked by a protectionist and risk prevention approach. However, the three countries present variations in children's perceptions about their online well-being, the support they use to deal with risks and their own role in digital socialization. Acknowledging these national differences favors appropriate interventions by decision makers of public safety and well-being policies, as well as from education, health, and family counseling professionals.

Keywords: family climate; family communication; digital socialization; cross-country comparisons; EU Kids Online

Introduction

Nowadays, digital media and mediated communication practices are deeply integrated in the everyday lives of families, contributing to the ways family members interact with each other and to the "family climate", that is the family paradigms, myths, and rituals (Maccoby, 2015). These mediated communication practices are not surprising, given that, in times of deep mediatization (Couldry & Hepp 2017; Hepp 2019), the social is increasingly saturated by, and interdependent on infrastructures of communication and digitally mediated practices. Not only do digital media pervade the intimacy of our homes; parenting itself has become mediatized (Mascheroni & Siibak, 2021) posing new challenges to, and normative pressures on parents while enabling children and young people to take a prominent role as technical helpers at home, reversing the generational socialization (Mascheroni, Ponte & Jorge, 2019).

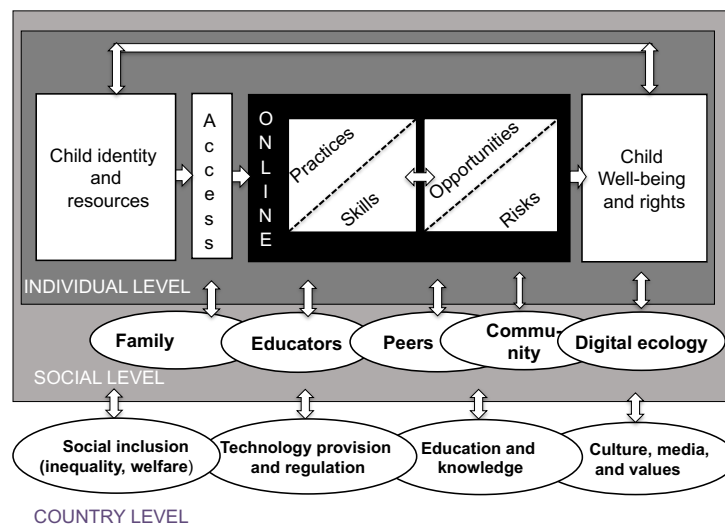
As pointed by Livingstone and Haddon (2012), the EU Kids Online network explores a child-centred approach to children's experiences, perspectives, and actions in relation to the internet, contextualizing them within concentric circles of structuring social influences – family, community and culture as pointed by Bronfenbrenner (1979). The first level of analysis is the individual, namely child's identity and resources.

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The second level foregrounds the ways in which children's lives are embedded in, shaped by and shaping their family, school, community and other cultural contexts (on and offline). The third level examines the influence of factors such as socio-digital inclusion, technology provision and regulation, culture, and education.

In a word, the EU Kids Online model (Figure 1) asks what happens to children's wellbeing and rights when the digital offers new pathways to outcomes for their cognitive, developmental, emotional, social and physical wellbeing; new social contexts where children interact, learn, and play; and new concerns that demand further regulation (e.g. commodification and datafication), as pointed by Livingstone, Mascheroni and Staksrud (2018). Based on this background, this article aims to explore the similarities and differences in the family climate in three Latin countries, considering children's age and gender in the individual level, the family in the social level and cultural factors at the country level.

Figure 1: The EU Kids Online framework



Source: Livingstone, Mascheroni & Staksrud (2018)

For cross-countries comparisons, the EU Kids considers the country as a unit of analysis, a perspective that considers national indicators to understand the diversity of national contexts, and to explain patterns of similarities and differences across countries (Hasebrink et al. 2008). As empirical evidence has shown, children's online use in different countries are affected by the level of technologies and services and by the level of societal and cultural practices (Hasebrink, 2014). As the author pointed out, "this societal appropriation of online communication is not a synchronous process across Europe (idem, 1).

In European terms, Italy, Spain, and Portugal share relatively high levels of social inequality – respectively 36,2, 34,8 and 33,3, in the GINI 2020 index (OECD, 2021). Demographically, the single child is the dominant pattern in households with children in the three countries, above the European average (Eurostat, 2020). Having experienced a later digital media penetration, the three countries share a relatively high use of social media (respectively 60, 62 and 69 per cent) in comparison to other European countries (Eurostat, 2020). The involvement of youth in the policymaking related to national regulation and provision of online safety policies is low (O'Neill, Dreyer & Dinh, 2020), in contrast with Northern European countries. Culturally placed as part of the Catholic Europe, Italy, and Spain present higher rational-secular values than Portugal, which is placed closer to the traditional values that characterize Latin American cultures (Inglehart-Wezel, 2020). Before exploring children's answers regarding family communication and digital socialisation in the recent EU Kids Online survey, the literature review frames parental mediation and remembers trends from other pan-European studies in which the three countries participated.

Literature review

Parental mediation and digital socialization

The mediatization of family life has raised increasing public concern around the impact of digital media on children's wellbeing. Yet, what such debates reflect is the increased digital dilemmas and the conflicting pressures on parents to protect their children from excessive screen time while "properly" investing in their digital futures (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020; Mascheroni et al., 2018). The way distinct families engage with such digital dilemmas involves more than simply regulating children's access to digital technologies. Which digital media are available at home, and whether and how they are made accessible to children, is shaped by parents' own understanding of digital media, their aspirations and fears regarding the consequences of the digital for children's wellbeing and development, and, ultimately, their family cultures. Based on a rich qualitative study on parenting for a digital future, Livingstone & Blum-Ross (2020) identify three main strategies of digital parenting through which parents navigate the complex challenges related to managing children's digital futures: parents who fully *embrace* digital technologies position themselves at the forefront of technological innovation in the attempt to equip children with valuable digital skills to be employed in their academic and/or professional careers; other families seek a *balance* between digital and non-digital practices, even though this means a continuous self-reflexive negotiation of the role of technologies in family life and in imagined futures; some families, instead, *resist* digital media and futures, trying to prioritise non digital activities in their children's everyday lives. Each genre, therefore, involves a distinctive set of practices underpinned by values and cultures, underlying how parental mediation is deeply connected to the "family climate" (Maccoby, 2015).

Parents play an important role not only in deciding what digital technologies to buy for their children, but also in mediating their access and use. The question for parents is how to support children's access to online opportunities while protecting them from potential harmful effects. In fact, family is a crucial social mediator of children's online wellbeing (Livingstone et al., 2018) and the primary site of digital socialization.

Parental mediation has long been researched, first in relation to television and, later, to the internet and digital media. The diverse practices through which parents have attempted to regulate children's internet use, to maximise its benefits while minimising the risks, have been grouped into two broad categories: enabling and restrictive mediation (Livingstone et al., 2017).

Restrictive mediation, which consists of rules limiting time spent online and/or content and activities, has been proved effective in reducing children's exposure to online risks. However, research has shown that restrictions also limit children's opportunities to develop digital skills and build resilience, beyond discouraging children's agency within the child-parent relationship (Livingstone et al., 2017). Enabling mediation, instead, encompasses a variety of mediation practices (including co-use, active mediation of internet safety, monitoring, and technical restrictions such as parental controls) that are aimed at scaffolding children's active engagement with online media (Livingstone et al., 2017). Insofar as parental mediation structures children's access to online opportunities, and their ability to build resilience, understanding how and why it varies has been deemed important in both research and policy.

Parental mediation is influenced by socioeconomic status and education both directly - with digital inequalities resting on and reinforcing social inequalities - and indirectly - with parents' economic and cultural capital directly shaping their approach to child-rearing.

On the one hand, research has shown that socio-economic background and education are correlated with parents' own digital skills and self-confidence in their ability to mediate children's online experiences (Correa, 2014; Livingstone et al., 2017; Martinez, Casado & Garitaonandia, 2020). On the other hand, parental mediation is shaped by "parenting styles" (Clark, 2013; Nelson, 2010): namely, the family's cultural values and systems of beliefs regarding child-rearing, that inform the environment in which children's learning is supported or, on the contrary, hindered.

The influence of socioeconomic status and education on parental mediation and the family climate is not linear nor clear-cut, though (Clark, 2013; Nathanson, 2018). In fact, while inequalities persist in access and usage, nonetheless a shared parenting culture has emerged and is gradually pervading families, at least in big global cities across Europe and worldwide. A culture which is "arguably middle-class in its ethos of

individualized achievement and itself a response to the individualization of risk in reflexive modernity — that encompasses poorer families too.” (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020: 83).

Parents’ digital skills, children’s own digital skills, the communicative proximity, and the parenting culture informing the child-parents relationships all contribute to the specific parental mediation strategies adopted within each family, and all shape the online experience of children. Paus-Hasebrink, Bauwens, Dürager, & Ponte (2013) identified four main patterns of parent-child relationships in relation to digital media and parental mediation: *the digital native vs. digital immigrant family*, where children outscore parents in terms of their digital skills and lead the family’s digital socialisation; *the unskilled family*, where both children’s and parents’ digital competence is low; *the triple C family*, characterised by a confident, caring and communicative parenting style and a predominance of enabling over restrictive mediation; and *the protective family*, where parents’ engagement in both enabling and restrictive mediation is beyond average, but their digital competence and internet use is lower. The Triple C family was identified as the main group across Europe (more than one third of all European families, crossing children’s age and gender), followed by the Protective family (a pattern more common among girls and younger children).

Based on such findings, digital socialization and parental mediation have been re-thought as a two-way process that starts with the child (Beyens, Valkenburg, P., & Piotrowski, J., 2018; van den Bulk, Custers & Nelissen, 2016). When it comes to media use, children are not passive recipients of top-down parental prescriptions. On the contrary, they act as agents of change, by introducing new technologies and new media content in the family, reversing existing media rules, or creating new rules, guiding their parents’ use, and mediating media effects (van den Bulk et al., 2016). At the same time, parental mediation varies according to the child’s age and online activities (Beyens et al., 2018).

Trends from previous pan-European surveys

In the last decade, Italy, Spain, and Portugal participated in three pan-European surveys, conducted in different digital moments, and providing results on children’s digital practices and parental mediation. In 2010, children’s private access through laptops in their bedrooms was an emerging practice as revealed in the EU Kids Online survey conducted in 25 countries. In the three Latin countries, the average age (9-10) of the first children’s access contrasted with the earlier internet use in the Nordic countries (7-8), in line with a lower digital penetration and with a higher generational gap between children and parents as daily internet users (Livingstone et al., 2011: 32).

An analysis of these EU Kids Online results identified a dominant pattern of “protected by restriction” in relation to opportunities, risks, reported harm and parental mediation, dominant in Western and Southern European countries, including the Latin ones (Helsper, Kalmus, Hasebrink, Sgvari & de Haan, 2013). The analysis by Paus-Hasebrink et al. (2013) mentioned above has found that the Triple C Family was at the top in Portugal and Spain, while the Protective Family led in Italy and was above the average in Spain.

Between 2014 and 2015, when smartphones were becoming popular, Italy, Spain and Portugal participated in the Net Children Go Mobile (NCGM) project, along with Belgium, Denmark, Ireland, Romania, and the UK. Among those children who owned or had a smartphone of their own, the self-confidence in its uses as compared with their parents was lower in Italy, particularly among younger children (aged 9-12). Only 49% considered it ‘very true’ that they knew more about using smartphones than their parents, for a European rate of 58% (Ponte, Velicu, Simões & Lambert., 2018). Italian children also reported more than the others that their parents “knew a lot/quite a bit” what they did online or on mobile: three in four children in Italy, around two out of three in Spain and Portugal (Mascheroni & Olafsson, 2014; Garmendia et al., 2015). These results go in line with the higher pattern of control and protection in Italy identified in 2010.

The most recent EU Kids Online survey (2017-2019) in 19 countries updated the picture of children’s online access, practices, skills, risks and opportunities, and social mediation by key agents such as parents, peers, and teachers. Considering new digital ecologies (smartphones, smart toys), regulations (eg. GDPR) and emerging trends (such as hate speech) the survey was designed to assure as much as possible comparisons with previous results and among the countries. However, several indicators used in 2010 and 2014 had to be reformulated and new indicators were created.

Results show a continuous and interstitial mobile access for similar practices and ranges on children using their mobile phones “several times a day or all the time” (SP: 55%; IT and PT: 58%). Compared to 2010,

the average time children spend on the internet has doubled or nearly doubled while children (continue to) engage mostly in communication and entertainment activities. There is an increased report of risk situations in relation to 2010 and 2014, and the rates of occasional upset and bothering situations substantially increased (Smahel et al. (2020).

Among the new indicators is the inclusion of a set of questions that further explores the family communication and wellbeing, besides parental mediation. Considering not only new trends in digital ecology and intensity of use, but also regularities in youth online practices, what can be said about the family climate – both regarding general communication within the family and digital socialization in a two-way process between children and parents – in these three countries? Are there similarities and differences? Are the results concerning family mediation in line with previous studies? These are the research questions of this article.

Methodology

After presenting the challenging conditions of data collection in general and in the three countries in particular, this section explains the statistical process for generating information that allowed the identification of the family climate as reported by children.

The EU Kids Online survey was conducted between autumn 2017 and summer 2019 in 19 countries, with funding ensured by national teams. Therefore, it was not possible to assure a uniform pattern of data collection as it happened in 2010. The methods for national samples included random-probability samples of households with children between 9 and 17 years, and sampling via schools. Sampling in households included criteria such as age of the child; sex; region; urban/rural areas; parents' education; parents' occupation. In schools, the target population were students enrolled in regular, vocational, general, or academic studies aged 9 to 17 years who were present in the classroom on the day of the survey. Sampling via schools was far less expensive but provided less information on the socio-economic and educational background of the families. Italy opted for a household sampling, while in Portugal and Spain sampling took place in school.

Among the three countries here considered, Italy was the first one where data was collected, between November and December 2017. The survey was carried out by Ipsos agency, with trained interviewers asking children each question and marking their answer through an electronic tool (CAPI methodology). In case of sensitive questions, the data collection tool was handed to children themselves. Portugal collected data between March and July 2018. Data was collected through a mixed approach combining computer-assisted self-interviewing and computer-assisted web interviewing. The survey was carried out by the Intercampus SA Agency. Children were instructed by interviewee to fill in the survey autonomously on an electronic tool (tablet, computers, notebook). Finally, Spain collected data between October and December 2018. Data was collected through paper assisted personal interviewing and the survey was carried out by CPS Estudios de Mercado and Opinión Agency. Here, trained administrators provided children with a paper-based version of the questionnaire and instructed them on how to fill it. The number of children (N=2860) is far above Portugal and Italy (respectively 1538 and 900), and they are also younger: 85% are below 15 years for around 75% in Italy and Portugal; 43% aged 9-11, for around a third in Italy and Portugal.

Regarding data analysis, selected answers of the survey were explored in two dimensions:

- *Family communication and wellbeing*; children were asked on a four-item scale how true (not true, a bit, fairly and very true) they classified things about their family and home: feeling listened, safe, helped, parents praising them and setting rules.
- *Family relations involving the digital*: children were asked questions about parent's enabling mediation (advice on internet safety; incentive to explore online opportunities; parent-child's conversations on what the child does online; parents' help in bothering situations); parents' technical supervision and surveillance; parents' practices of sharenting; children asking for family support; children ignoring parents' rules and the child as a digital helper.

The first step was the descriptive data of the three countries. Since Spain did not consider 17 years old, for comparative purposes, we analysed data from children and adolescents from 9 to 16 years old, weighted by

sex, age, and region (Zlamal *et al.*, 2020); the results consider valid data. We applied the same procedures for providing the average of the 19 countries involved in EUKO last data collection. The total (N=22.098) is slightly more than the subsample considered on Smahel *et al.* (2020) report.

The second step was the creation of two main indexes by summing up the respective variables into one measure:

- *Family communication* (FM, 3 items, range 3 to 12) included the frequency of children feeling being heard, helped and safe.
- *Digital socialization* (DS, 9 items, range 9 to 43) added values from variables related to the frequency of children asking for family support, four variables on parents' active mediation, one on parents' practice of sharenting, frequency of reverse mediation and children ignoring parents' rules, in a reversed scale.

Both scales show an acceptable internal consistency according to the Cronbach' alpha reliability measure (0,749 and 0,773 respectively).

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the two scales for Family Communication and Digital Socialization. These measures were then divided into three categories: low (FM: 3 to 6; DS: 9 to 20), medium (FM: 7 to 9; DS: 21 to 29) and high (FM: 10 to 12; DS: 30 to 43).

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of Family Communication and Digital Socialization

<i>Family Communication/countries</i>	Spain	Italy	Portugal	19 countries
Mean	10,3	10,9	10,13	10,4
Median	11,0	12,0	11,0	11,0
Variation coefficient	21%	14%	19%	19%
Interquartile range	3	2	3	3
<i>Digital Socialization/countries</i>				
Mean	22,8	23,7	24,4	23,4
Median	23,0	24,0	24,0	23,0
Variation coefficient	30%	25%	26%	29%
Interquartile range	11	8	9	10

Source: Authors' elaboration

Results

We start by introducing descriptive results from the EU Kids Online survey in the three Latin countries connecting them with previous studies and with the 19 countries average, thus allowing comparative views. From here, we define the patterns of family climate and identify their distribution by age and gender in Portugal, Italy, and Spain, answering to our research questions. Some tables present the extreme rates (not true/never vs fairly or very true/often or very often) for showing their relative positions.

Family communication and safety

In line with the 19 countries' average, a sense of safety and family support is reported by almost all children in the three countries, being particularly high in Italy.

Italian children are also the ones that point to higher levels of verbal and affective communication as well as parental regulation. Remarkably, more than nine in 10 report that their voices are listened at home, while Spanish and particularly Portuguese children are below the average. On the opposite site, the perception of not having their voices heard at home is relatively high in Spain: those that report this statement as not true are almost twice in relation to Portugal and to the average.

Led by Italy, in the three countries the number of children that reports that often their parents praise them for good behaviour and set rules on what they can do at home is above the average. While only a few of Italian children report both regulatory practices as inexistent, in Spain the absence of these parental interventions is in line with the average. In Portugal, where two in three children report setting rules as a frequent parental practice, there is a balance between a full and an occasional absence of regulation.

Table 2. Reporting safety and communication at home (%)

Safety, wellbeing, and communication/ countries	Spain	Italy	Portugal	19 countries
<i>I feel safe at home</i>				
Not true	4	1	4	3
Fairly/ Very true	91	97	92	93
<i>My family really tries to help me</i>				
Not true	4	1	3	3
Fairly/ Very true	88	96	90	90
<i>When I speak someone listens to what I say</i>				
Not true	13	1	7	7
Fairly/ Very true	72	91	69	77
<i>My parent or carer praises me for behaving well</i>				
Never/ Hardly ever	11	5	9	11
Often/ Very often	71	78	74	67
<i>My parent or carer sets rules about what I can do at home</i>				
Never/ Hardly ever	21	4	14	21
Often/ Very often	61	78	65	54

Source: EU Kids Online dataset, 9 to 16 years

Looking at the experiences of bothering online situations was the further step to identify the frequency of communicative coping within the family, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Bothering situations and communicative coping (%)

Bothering situations and communicative coping/ / countries	Spain	Italy	Portugal	19 countries
Experience of online bothering situation	34	11	22	28
<i>For children who say yes/Did you talk to... about it?</i>				
Mother or father	47	45	37	38
Brother or sister	31	12	13	17
A friend around my age	69	45	44	51
A teacher	12	5	7	6
Someone whose job is to help children	8	0	1	3
Another adult I trust	32	2	10	11
I didn't talk to anyone	21	23	26	22

Source: EU Kids Online dataset, 9 to 16 years

In the 19 countries, more than a quarter of children aged 9 to 16 reported having experienced online bothering situations in the last year. Spanish children are slightly above and report three times more than the Italian ones. Portuguese children are in a between position and below the average.

For communicative coping, friends and parents are the main sources of support in the 19 countries average. In relation to the family support, Portugal is close to the average regarding parents, while Spanish and Italian children place them above. Siblings are much more reported in Spain than in the other two Latin countries, although the demographic similarity across countries.

Remarkably, Spanish children report a wide range of confidants and helpers: at the top, around two in three supporters are friends around their age; around one in three are siblings and trusty adults. These helpers are much less reported in Italy and Portugal, relatively in line with (or slightly below) the average.

Interestingly, the single common pattern across Europe is the absence of communicative coping, reported by around one in five children.

Digital socialization

The questions explored for this section include from the parents' side, practices of active mediation, use of technical supervision and control, sharenting; the child's as digital helper at home, and reactions to parents' practices of sharenting and regulations.

From the parents' side, the digital socialization in the three countries (Table 4) presents two trends that are in line with the average: the dominant absence of stimulus for a proactive exploitation of the online; and a frequent availability to help the child when he/she faces a bothering situation.

Around one in five children aged 9-16 report that their parents often encourage them to explore and learn things on the internet. The absence of encouragement is reported by around half of children in Spain and Italy, while Portugal is in line with the average.

Active mediation for internet safety is far above the average in the three countries, particularly in Italy, where around half children report their parents often suggest ways to use the internet safely and talk to them on what they do online. Consequently, Italy gets the lowest rates of children pointing that these supportive practices never happen.

By contrast, Spain presents the highest rates of absence of parental support regarding advice on internet safety, talk about the child does online or help when something bothers, the latter two far above the 19 countries average. Portugal occupies an in-between position, close to the average. A comparison with previous surveys is not possible due to different formulations of the questions.

According to children, the above forms of active mediation are higher than mediation based on technical controls. In Italy and Portugal, technical means of blocking, filtering, or keeping track of content are slightly above the average of one out of five children, while Spanish rates are below. Technical means to track where the child is are in line with the average in Spain and Portugal and less reported in Italy.

The practice of publishing information about the child without asking his/her permission (sharenting) is slightly rising. As the Spanish parents reported in another survey, parents share their children's picture to keep contact with the extended family and friends (Garmendia et al., 2020). In the three countries, the Portuguese children are the ones that report more, far above the average.

From the children's side, more than one in ten reported having already asked their parents to remove things they have published online, without country differences and in line with the average.

Regarding reverse socialisation, more than half of the Portuguese and Spanish children report they often help their parents on the digital, far above the average. Far below, around one in three Italian children report being frequent digital helpers, not far from those that report having never taken this active role in the family.

Finally, in relation to ignoring parental advice on the internet, remarkably the rates of children that report this action as frequent are low and in line with the average. Around two in three Spanish and Portuguese children report they never/hardly ever ignore this advice, above the average and clearly above Italian children.

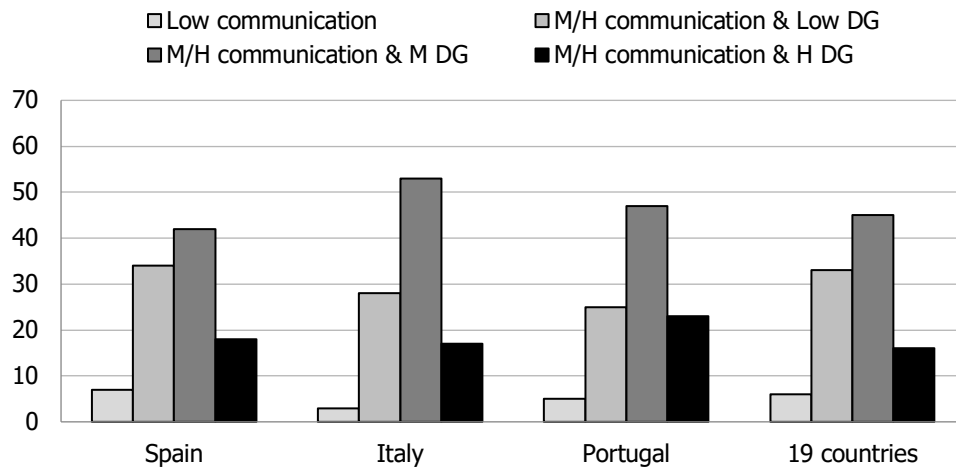
Table 4: Indicators of digital socialization (%)

Digital socialization/countries	Spain	Italy	Portugal	19 countries
My parents suggest ways to use the internet safely				
<i>Never/ Hardly ever</i>	35	18	29	35
<i>Often/ Very often</i>	43	53	46	39
...encourage me to explore and learn things on the internet				
<i>Never/ Hardly ever</i>	53	49	46	45
<i>Often/ Very often</i>	22	20	22	23
...talk to me about what I do on the internet				
<i>Never/ Hardly ever</i>	52	26	40	41
<i>Often/ Very often</i>	27	47	32	30
...help me when something bothers me on the internet				
<i>Never/ Hardly ever</i>	45	33	37	38
<i>Often/ Very often</i>	41	40	41	39
My parents have...				
used technical means of blocking or filtering types of content	16	26	24	20
used technical means of keeping track of content or apps	13	22	23	19
used technical means to track where I am (such as GPS)	15	9	16	15
published information about me without asking first	18	14	28	19
I have already...				
asked my parents to remove things they had published on the internet	13	10	13	13
helped parents when they found something difficult online				
<i>Never/ Hardly ever</i>	23	32	21	28
<i>Often/ Very often</i>	52	35	56	43
ignored what my parent says about how and when I can use the internet				
<i>No</i>	68	49	65	55
<i>Yes, Often</i>	8	8	5	9

Source: EU Kids Online dataset, 9 to 16 years

Articulating the family climate

Combining values of family communication (single measure created from selected variables in Table 2) and digital socialization (index on selected variables in Table 4), makes visible four compositions of the family climate. Remarkably, the relation of both variables is statistically significant according to the χ^2 measure in the three countries (PT: 108.275, $p < .001$; IT: 9.873, $p < .05$; SP: 152.608, $p < .001$)

Figure 1. The family climate in SP, IT, PT and the 19 countries average (%)

Source: Authors' elaboration

Each country presents similarities with the average pattern and differences in the relative weight of each type.

More than half of the Italian families articulates *Middle/high family communication* and *middle digital socialization*, far above the position reached by Spain. Portugal is in an in-between position and close to the average rate (45%).

The articulation between *Middle/high family communication* and *low digital socialization* is not far from the top in Spain, representing around one in three families. This is due to the relatively high rates of absence of parental advice, talk and help in relation to the online. Nevertheless, Spanish rate is close to the 19 countries average (33%). In Italy and particularly in Portugal this type of climate is below the average.

Portugal leads the third position, articulating *Middle/high family communication* and *high digital socialization*, where it represents more than out of five families. It is above the 19 countries average (16%), from which Spain and Italy are close.

Low family communication (average: 6%) combined with whatever level of digital socialization is clearly at the bottom in the three Latin countries and is almost residual in Italy.

The distribution of these types of family climate by age and gender in the three countries shows other similarities, as shown in Figures 2 and 3.

Family climate is related to gender in the three countries and related to age in Portugal and Spain, according to the χ^2 measure (Gender - PT: 33.939, $p < .001$; IT: 14.386, $p < .01$; SP: 22.780, $p < .001$; Age - PT: 23.266, $p < .01$; IT: 9.001, $p > .05$; SP: 31.757, $p < .00$).

Figure 2: Family climate by gender in Spain, Italy and Portugal (%)

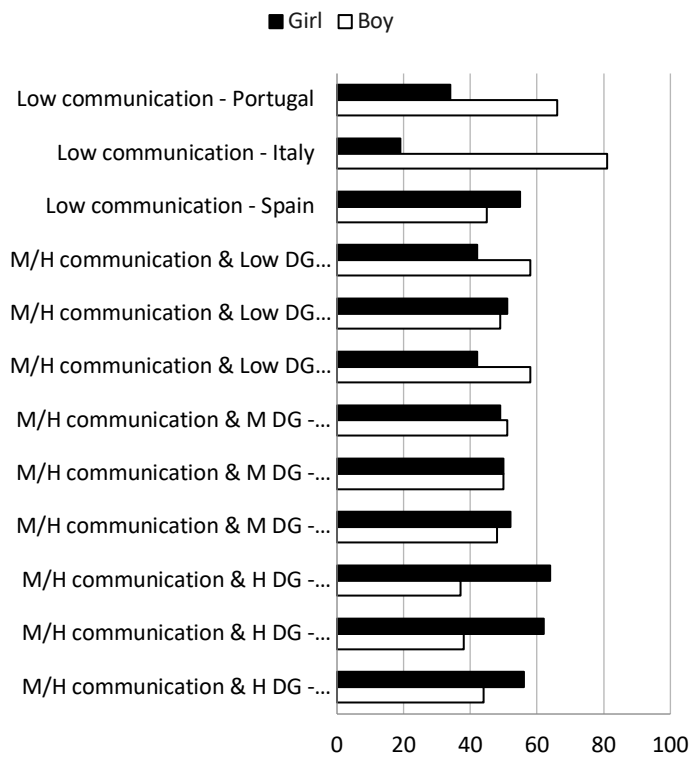
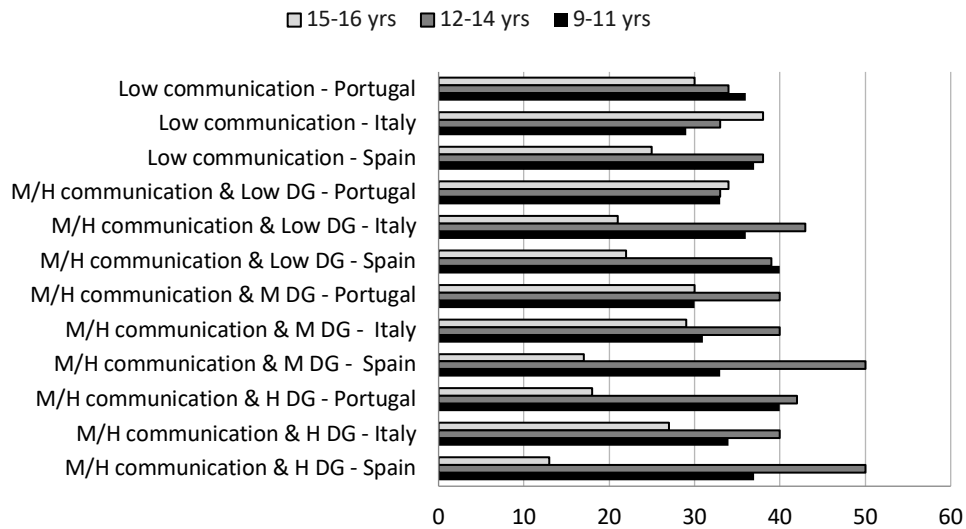


Figure 3: Family climate by age in Spain, Italy and Portugal (%)



Source: Authors' elaboration

Middle/high communication and high digital socialization is clearly connected to girls. In the three countries the oldest age group is clearly below the others, in accordance with their higher digital autonomy.

Middle/high communication and medium digital socialization, the prevalent pattern, does not present visible differences by gender. In the three countries, children aged 12-14 lead. In Portugal, younger and older children present similar rates, while in Italy and Spain the second place goes to younger children.

Middle/high communication and low digital socialization is clearly dominated by boys in Spain and Portugal, and gender balanced in Italy. By age, it is similarly the oldest respondents in Spain and Italy, while in Portugal the distribution is balanced.

Low communication, having a residual presence, is far more reported by boys than by girls in Italy and Portugal, where in Spain, girls are slightly above boys. This lack of communication is more reported by younger age groups in Spain and Portugal, while in Italy it grows with age.

Discussion

This cross-national focus on the family climate in relation to the digital penetration within the families clearly illustrates the opportunities and the challenges of the cross-country comparison, here considering not only three Latin countries but also their relative position within the 19 countries average.

Even though some country-level mediators, which may influence children's online experiences, such as broadband infrastructure or education systems, have not been considered, the three national contexts share similarities regarding the relatively high levels of social inequality, family structure (the single child as the dominant presence in the family), a later digital penetration, high digital practices of communication and social networking and a missing culture of considering children as participants in policy designs related to them.

Comparing results from three different periods of time (2010, 2014 and 2017-19) reveal that in general children's online experiences have gradually changed, intensifying their internet uses and making it more ubiquitous. These longitudinal changes, immersed in updated and reformulated indicators, have also indirectly influenced the research questions regarding the family climate, both regarding general communication within the family and digital socialization in a two-way process between children and parents. When children's online experiences are intensified due to the more ubiquitous mobile use and when they are facing much more bothering situations, the answers to our research questions on the family climate in three Latin countries present ambivalent results.

Firstly, despite their particularities, the family climate in these South European countries is in line with the 19 countries average, as shown in Figure 2. The prevalence of middle/high communication and middle digital socialisation suggests the strategies of balance identified by Livingstone & Blum-Ross (2020). The family climate seems to be much more supported on safety and communication within the family and on advice/support regarding the online than on other forms of enabling mediation favouring children's skills. Among the similar cross-national rates is the dominant lack of incentive to explore new things on the internet. A risk adverse culture protectionism is a shared pattern in line with the 19 countries average. While Portuguese results tend to be in line with the average, the Spanish and Italian results present opposite trends that deserve attention.

It is particularly striking that the highest rates of Middle/high communication and low digital socialization are led by Spain, where more children report having experienced online bothering situations. This pattern, which is near the top in this country, is supported by the high levels of absence of parental digital mediation (advice, talk and help) claimed by Spanish children, above all by those who are aged 9 to 11. While children's self-reports show a big communicative gap in their families, evidence provided by a recent survey (Garmendia et al., 2020) confirms that Spanish parents' answers regarding the same items do nearly double the frequency. In line with previous studies, these discrepancies between informants in terms of the amount of mediation could be explained because children perceived less mediation as compared to their parents (Sonck et al., 2013) and because parents may be motivated to exaggerate their parenting activities while children may be motivated to exaggerate their personal autonomy (Symons, 2017).

Italian results evoke the combination of the Triple C (caring, communicative, confident) and the Protective Family (Paus-Hasebrink et al., 2013), as well as a lack of self-confidence in their own digital skills (Ponte et al., 2018), noted in past comparative analysis. In the current analysis, the Italian children are the ones that feel safer, more heard and more regulated at home; they report lower levels of online bothering experiences, consider their parents as key supporters and report more their parents' advice on safety and talk to on what they do online. In this apparently high parental control, they position themselves less active as digital helpers in the family, suggesting a lack of confidence on their digital skills. Interestingly, they also report ignoring more frequently their parents' rules than their peers in Portugal and Spain. While not forgetting the conditions of the field work in Italy (data collected at home), the present results framed by the previous studies invite to reflect on possible cultural patterns within the Italian families.

Secondly, regarding the child's position in the dual process of parental mediation, the family climate is related to gender in the three countries, while its relation to age occurs only in Portugal and Spain.

Suggesting a gender stereotype that places girls as more vulnerable and less autonomous in relation to the digital (Garaigoidobil & Aliri, 2012; Martínez et al., 2020; Sonck et al., 2013), the cross-country comparison goes in line with the pattern of gender mediation, in which girls are more targeted than boys. Regarding mediating across age, young teens (12-14 yrs.) are paid more attention than pre-teens (9-11 yrs.) and older teens (15-17 yrs.). Rather than vulnerability this mediation seems to be related to more intensive mobile use and higher exposure to risky behavior which evidence shows to increase in this age group (Livingstone et al., 2011; Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2014). Regarding reverse mediation, remarkably more than half of children in Spain and Portugal report a frequent role as digital helpers of their parents, also suggesting their functional skills.

The limits of this analysis on the family climate should be considered for results' interpretation as well as for future research. As pointed out, the different conditions of data collection (in schools, at home) may have affected the national samples and rates. Likewise, the absence of parental answers can give an unbalanced picture of the digital family climate. Furthermore, these quantitative results should be carefully interpreted as far as they identify simplified strategies that combine different mediation practices according to specific situations (López de Ayala et al., 2019) where protectionism could be an answer to specific risks. Qualitative research methods are suggested for future research to explore if this over protectionism can be explained as an effect of other family-context factors.

Conclusions

Looking at each country in comparison with others provides data for reflection and suggestions for national policies regarding families and education, digital inclusion, and children's wellbeing. The comparative analysis suggests that the family climate in Spain, Italy and Portugal is defined more by cultural paradigms and frames of relevance (e.g., parents' duty of ensuring children's safety and comfort at home, the risk aversion) and by conservative positions regarding its members (gender matters; the child still seen as a minor in need of regulation) than by related dynamics of change and enabling competencies generated by the online environment. While most results are in line with the 19 countries average, differences between Italy and Spain regarding children's reported well-being invite to explore more the meanings behind the numbers.

In general children feel safe and heard at home. Nonetheless both an over-protectionism and a lack of encouragement regarding the digital provoked, among other factors, by low levels of enabling mediation - which affect more girls than boys and younger than older children - should be considered by those in charge of looking after children's digital wellbeing. Parental advice on enabling mediation and adequate programs of digital literacy designed for children and families should be provided. In accordance with the European Better Internet for Kids strategy for a safer and better internet for children and young people, schools are considered as the more desirable place to be helped by local, regional, and national administrations to implement programs of digital literacy carefully designed for families and students. As shown in this cross-national comparison, those programs should not ignore children's and youth people agency, considering both the peer to peer and reverse socializations.

Finally, since this data was collected before COVID 19, it captures pre-pandemic moments. To what extent the intensification of digital use in the households due to the lockdown may have affected the family digital socialization is something that deserves attention in further similar data collection and analysis. As this article has shown, attention to the long term and trends when looking at current results provides a precious background for illuminating discussion and providing recommendations.

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