

# *Virtual Stages Against Violence.*

## **A Survey of Internet Uses and Activities among Adolescents, Parents and Teachers**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In order to better implement the various activities foreseen in the VSAV project, Partner 1 has carried out a survey across the four partner countries: Austria (AT), Germany (DE), Italy (IT) and Romania (RO).

The main objective of the survey was to identify the Internet uses and behaviors – both in terms of opportunities and risks – of a non representative sample of European adolescents. As an important sub-objective, we also wanted to take into consideration the role parents play within the family in supervising/controlling the online activities of their children. Finally, as a complement to this educational framework, we also considered a group of teachers, surveying their private and professional uses of the Internet, their “Internet culture” so to speak, as well as (just like with parents) their awareness of how Internet is actually used by their students.

As said, the survey was carried out across the four partner countries and included three different samples:

- **377 adolescents** (14-16 years old)
- **528 parents**
- **179 teachers**

These three samples have been chosen according to a non probabilistic sampling procedure aiming at “typological” and non statistical representativeness. Hence, it must be borne in mind that no statistical inferences from them to the entire population are possible. Yet they can be quite useful to generate descriptive/exploratory comments about the sample itself and also develop new ideas/hypotheses that can be more systematically tested later. Secondly, they are quick, inexpensive and convenient. Finally, in case of applied social research – as it is ours – it is often unfeasible/impractical to conduct probability sampling.

Therefore, despite the fact that no inferences beyond our samples are possible, our survey is still valuable as it can be very informative about the subjects who *most probably* have very similar characteristics, attitudes and behaviors. Again, we’re not aiming at some kind of statistical representativeness, but rather at constructing a sociological typology that means to illustrate the variety of the population.

What we present here is just a summary of our findings. A more detailed analysis can be found in the final report which will be written at the end of the project.

#### ***1. Young people and the Internet***

Our survey shows that 87,3% of the adolescents’ sampled uses Internet on a daily basis. Almost half of the adolescents we interviewed (42,6%) says they accessed the Internet for the first time

when they were between 6 and 10 years old: this percentage decreases at 30,0% for Austria and raises at 56,6% for Romania. On the average, adolescents spend on the Internet between 2 hours and a half/3 hours in a normal school day, a bit less for the Austrians, the Germans and the Italians (2 hours/2 hours and a half), and even more for the Romanians (3 hours and a half/4 hours). Time spent on the Internet on a normal non-school day increases: about 3 hours and a half for the Italians and the Austrians, about 4 hours for the Germans and up to 7 hours for the Romanians.

If we analyze the distribution across different time ranges, we observe some interesting trends among the sample of European adolescents we interviewed. The Austrians seem to be the most moderate users (42,0% access the Internet for less than 1 hour per day and 36,0% from 1 to 3 hours) as compared with the other three countries, especially the Romanians.

These trends are similar in normal non-school days too. More than 50% of the Austrians, the Germans and the Italians (more precisely, from 54% to 64%) spend time on the Internet for less than 3 hours, while with the Romanians this percentage drops to 27,0%.

As for the technological devices used for accessing the Internet, some specificities emerge from data:

- the most used devices are PCs (86,7%) and mobile phones (73,9%) for Romania; laptops (71,0%) and mobile phones (74,0%) for Austria; the Germans and the Italians distribute their uses more evenly across the devices listed in the questionnaire;
- the less used devices are: laptops shared with the rest of the family for the Romanians (15,7%) and the Germans (11,8%), who also uses slightly use television (11,9%) and videogame consoles (8,8%).

As for the places from which adolescents access the Internet, we observe that:

- over 80,0% of them have access from their bedroom at home, followed by a friend's house (from 73,0% to 76,8%, with the exception of the Romanians, 49,4%);
- significantly, 91,0% of the Austrians and 75,7% of the Germans say they access the Internet from school, quite differently from the Italians (24,2%) and the Romanians (30,8%).

The activity most frequently done on the Internet by the adolescents sampled is "visit a social network". If we make a list of the first three activities most frequently done (every day or almost) in each country, we observe that – despite some minor differences from one another – besides visiting a social network, another quite frequent activity is "watch videoclips", together with the "use of instant messaging" and "read/watch the news" (although only for 41,0% of the Austrians).

The least frequently done activities are: "spent time in a virtual world", "make purchases" and "visit a chatroom".

As for social networks, 88,1% of the total sample says to have a profile on a social network site, with no significant gender differences across the countries. This percentage raises to 95,0% in Italy and 90,0% in Romania and decreases to 83% in Austria and Germany.

If we look at the national peculiarities regarding the continuum "public-private" in the social network profile set, we can see have the following findings:

- Romania: 40,9% has a private profile and 38,6% a public one;
- Germany: 52,4% public and 14,3% private
- Italy: 63,4% private and 11,8% public
- Austria: 73,5% private and only 8,4% public.

As a further confirmation of the "openness" of the Romanians, we can look at the percentages regarding the kind of contacts they have on the Internet: 26,7% of them says to have contact with "unknown" people and 47,7% with unknown people who are friends or family they know in person or friends. On the contrary, the majority of respondents from the other three countries declare they prefer to contact with "People whom you first met in person" (46,0% of the Germans, 57,6% of the Austrians and 60,2% of the Italians).

In one short section of the questionnaire, we asked children to self-evaluate their competence in using the Internet and also specify what they are actually able to do. The most of the respondents

think to have a medium-high competence, with some differences among the partner countries: the Germans are mostly convinced to be very competent (59,2%), while the Italians, the Romanians and the Austrians are more evenly distributed along the “fairly competent” and “very confident” modalities.

As for the specific areas respondents believe to be competent at, the differences emerged among the respondents confirm the self-perceived level of competence mentioned above. Therefore, the Romanians believe to be least competent while the Germans show the highest percentages in all items, with just a couple of minor exceptions.

In the section “Mediation” of the questionnaire we asked the children to tell us what they think their parents know about their Internet activities and if and how they participate in or share their Internet activities in order to verify whether it is a form of control or supervision.

The activity that is most widely shared, albeit with some deviations, is "Speak with the parents of what you do on the Internet", which is indicated by a greater number of the Italians (59.0 %) and the Romanians (49.5 %) and less by the Germans (44.7 %) and the Austrians (37.0). The Italian parents tend to be more "intrusive": 54,5% of them not only speak with the children of what they do to the Internet, but is nearby when their children are online (other parents are all below 40%). For 41.4 % participation culminates in a genuine sharing of Internet activities (percentage that in other countries does not exceed 30 %). The Austrians parents, on the other hand, are those less "present".

Parents' presence can be perceived by their children as either a support or a sanction. We can see that the most supportive parents are the Austrians: 69,0% of them says that their parents help them to search the web, 57,0% is advised by them on how to surf the web safely and 54,0% knows well what sites are safe or unsafe thanks to their parents' help. Percentages are lower when this presence is perceived as more “obtrusive”, like when parents give advice on how to behave on the Internet. A similar trend is also noted for the German sample, even if the percentages relating to the presence of certain types of behavior are lower. As usual, the Italians parents are perceived as the most intrusive: 58,0% of the young Italians we interviewed says they have been advised on how to behave with other people met on the Internet, while 50,0% of them has talked with their parents on how to behave when something “bothers” them on the Internet.

As for the control actions enacted by parents, another interesting element emerges from the answers given by our young respondents. Once again, the Italian parents are the most obtrusive: in this case, the negative answers (indicating the activities that are NOT controlled by parents such as websites visited, emails, social network profile, etc.) are always lower (ranging from 50,0% to 66,0%) than other countries (ranging from 71,0% to 92,9%).

As mentioned, the questionnaire to children contained also an important part dedicated to Internet risks (such as cyberbullying, meeting online with strangers, visiting unsafe websites, etc.).

Cyberbullying do not seem to be very much experienced by the young respondents of our sample:

- less than 12% of the Austrians and the Germans mentions episodes of it;
- the Italians seem a bit more involved in receiving or sending offensive messages (respectively, 24,7% and 16,5%);
- the Romanians are even more involved (from 14,0% to 38,0%).

As for sending/receiving sexual messages, about half of the Austrian sample has been involved in this kind of activity, this percentage decreases to 35,6% for the Italians and 71,0% for the Romanians.

Meeting and having contact with strangers are generally more frequent in all four partner countries. Visiting “unsafe websites” is definitely a quite rare activity for the Austrians (all percentages range from 5% to 12%), while in other countries it is a bit more frequent, albeit with percentages that always go from 20,2% to 31,6,%.

Among the things that might be “bothering”, we have included the threats to privacy, such as the unauthorized or unpleasant use of personal information by others, online frauds involving

money loss or viruses that might infect PCs). Our sample, across the four countries, seems to be slightly exposed to online frauds (all percentages below 6,0%). The most frequent risk is being infected by a virus: percentages range from 20,3% to 50,5% (lower among the Germans and the Austrians, and higher among the Italians and the Romanians). As for privacy, all percentages are below 15%.

## 2. *The parents and the Internet*

Generally speaking, the parents in our sample seem to use the Internet in quite “adult” ways, albeit with some minor differences from country to country, with little or no use of the Internet according to adolescent-like practices.

For example, the daily use of the Internet “for work” is quite frequent across the four partner country, more evidently so with the Austrians and the Germans and less with the Romanians and the Italians. Interestingly, while “play videogames with other people” is basically never done by over 90% of the parents, the Romanians do play occasionally. Indeed, an evidence of the different level of “digitalization” of work activities between mid-European and southern European countries. Also “watch video clips” is not so frequent, although the Italians and the Romanians say they do it once or twice a week, followed by the Germans and the Austrians. Basically never done is the “download of music or films” (especially for the Germans), as the high percentages of answers given to the “never” option show. Once again, it is the Romanians who do it on a daily or weekly basis.

On the contrary, “read/watch the news” is one of the most practiced activities on a daily basis, firstly among the Austrians, followed by the Italians, the Germans and lastly the Romanians. Another interesting evidence regards the use of “electronic mail”. While among the Austrians and the Germans the percentage of answers given to the “never option” is basically equal to zero, for the Italians and especially the Romanians it increases respectively to 26,8 % and 24,3%. Almost 80% of the Austrians and 88% of Germans uses it on a daily basis, followed by the Romanians and the Italians (both around 44%). If we look at Italy in particular, these data, as also other studies show (Censis, 2009), confirm the dichotomy between those who regularly use the Internet and those who does that rarely or never. Hypothetically, the Italian parents can be divided into two kinds of users, the “operators” and the “observers”, that is those who use the Internet either for getting information or, more frequently, for work, and those who use the Internet only for getting information and quite less for work (the use of email is most of the times connected with work).

Also with the activity “visit a social network profile” we notice some difference across the countries surveyed. Usually, it is not frequently done, but whereas for the Germans and the Austrians the frequency is evenly distributed between never and a few times a month, for the Italians and the Romanians it is more polarized between the “never” option and the “once or twice a week” option. Totally unpracticed by all parents in the sample is the activity of “visiting a chatroom” or a “virtual world”.

Although with very low percentages, the Romanian parents are those who “use instant messaging” daily or once/twice a week, followed by the Austrians, the Italians and the Germans. Similarly, the Romanian parents are those who “play games online” daily or once/twice a week more than anyone else in the sample (12,6%). The Austrians, the Italians and the Germans do not go beyond 4%.

As for “making purchases online”, our survey seems to confirm a tendency already emerged in other studies about consumer habits in Europe: more than half the sample of the Italian and the Romanians parents says they never do it (respectively, 51,4% and 69,%). Although not on a daily basis, other parents do make online purchases on a monthly basis or so (the Austrians 84,3%, the Germans 79,7%, the Italians 35,6%, the Romanians 21,2%).

Another important area we surveyed regards the knowledge parents have (or think they have) about their children's online uses and behaviors. Questions mirror, so to speak, what we asked to adolescents too so as to verify not only if and how parents have a "direct" control on their children but more importantly if this control is somehow negotiated with children.

We observe that usually parents seem to be aware that their children access the Internet mainly from their own bedroom or from some other shared room of the house; they know they do not access it frequently from school (especially Italians and Romanians); nor from an Internet café or public library (for all parents, but in particular for the Romanians and then Italians). The fact that the German and the Austrian parents are well aware that Internet is used in their children's school shows the different penetration of digital technologies across the European school systems as well as the adoption of different models of cultural reproduction.

In general all parents in the sample seem to know that their children also access Internet from a relative's house. Interestingly, the Austrians in this case seem less certain than they were with the access from a friend's house, as we've seen. Once again, a proof – maybe – of their more "realistic" perception of the children's Internet habits.

Another important dimension we surveyed concerned the production by both parents and their children of certain "discourses" about the Internet. In this case too, some interesting differences emerge from country to country.

To "talk with them about what they do on the Internet" is quite usual for the Austrian, the German and the Italian parents, a little less for the Romanians. To "sit with them while they use the Internet (watching what they're doing but not really joining in)" is very common among the Austrian parents, much less common for the Germans and the Romanians, followed by the Italians. To "stay nearby when they use the Internet" is typical of the Italian and the Romanian parents, a bit less with the Germans, a lot less with the Austrians. Unlike the educational culture of mid-European countries, this is a kind of "indirect" control quite frequent in Italy which deserves further investigation.

Other differences emerge with the following item: "Encourage them explore the Internet and learn things on their own". Once again, it is the Austrians who seem more willing to do that, followed by the Romanians, and – with a similar percentage – the Germans and the Italians, apparently more diffident toward the Internet. The shared use of the Internet is quite common among the Germans, averagely common among the Italians and the Austrians, much less common among the Romanians, something probably due to the different levels of Internet use among adults in these countries.

Accordingly, the Austrian and the German parents are more willing (or maybe competent) to "help their children with doing or finding things on the Internet". The Italians and the Romanians follow with roughly half of the sample. Once again, this is something probably due to a less frequent use of the Internet, rather than to different pedagogical strategies.

As for the item about "suggesting ways to choose among bad or good website", "to use the Internet safely", "to behave with people met on the Internet", a vast majority of parents at EU-level gives a positive answer with no relevant differences from country to country, a further evidence, in our opinion, of a general situation of uncertainty and instability in older generations (especially among Romanians and Italians) most probably due to a lack of digital competence rather than to some kind of disinterest or an excess of apocalyptic visions against the Internet.

The same for the last item – "Help/talk to them when something on the Internet bothers them" – where, once again, despite a general positive answer given by all of the parents, the Austrians are at top of the list and the Romanians at the bottom.

Another important area we investigated through the parents' questionnaire regards the level of control/permission parents give to their children for their Internet access. Total permission to use "instant messaging" is generally granted by every parent (percentages range from 66,7% to 75,5%), with the significant exception of the German parents (only 18,2%). When it comes to "download

photos, videos, music, etc.”, parents become stricter, although with some difference, as usual, between the Romanian parents (80,2%) and the rest (Italians 59,5%, Austrians 58,8%, Germans – once again – only 16,9%). Much more generally allowed is the “online watching of video clips”. Basically all parents give total permission to it, even the Germans seem more inclined to let their children do it freely anytime. As for “social network profiles”, the Italian and especially the German parents are the strictest ones. In fact, 44,0% of the German children cannot have a profile at all, as compared to the Romanians and the Austrians, whose children can freely have a profile (respectively, 73,9% and 83,3%). To “give out personal information” is indeed a much more restricted activity by all parents. Children can never do it according to 74,0% of German parents, followed by the Romanians (58,8%), the Italians (52,0%) and the Austrians (48,0%). As for the item regarding “playing online videogames”, percentages are more evenly distributed among the three modalities (can never do this, can only do this with permission, can do this anytime), with once again a polarization between the “restrictive” Germans and the “permissive” Romanians.

Another kind of control we surveyed was the one done “ex-post” by parents. In this case too we noticed the same kind of differentiation across the four countries which deserves further analysis. As for now, we can temporarily conclude – once again – that differences in the forms of parental control are directly linked to the degree of digital competence parents have. Presumably, the Italians and the Romanian parents do not check their children’s profile on social networks because they do not know how to do it. Instead, the Austrians and the German parents – who are more competent – are more inclined to control. Therefore, we think that the Italians and the Romanians are not so much more permissive as they are less competent.

The absence of control through some kind of technological device further confirms what we’ve just said, with the exception of the item regarding the installation of antivirus/antispam, a practice quite widespread also among the least competent persons.

We also asked parents whether they knew if their children had ever been involved in some particular Internet activities that might be risky, such as meeting with strangers first known online or being exposed to violent, offensive or sexual material. According to most of the parents, children have not been exposed to this kind of risky behaviors, with the partial exception of Romanian and Italian parents.

Finally, in the last part of the questionnaire, we asked parents about their level of agreement with regards to some statements.

On average, more than a half of the sample agrees a lot or a fair amount that “censorship and limited access are not a feasible nor desirable solution to handle children’s relationship with the Internet”. The remaining does not agree very much or at all. Surprisingly, the Romanian parents (and a bit less the Italians) seem more inclined to censorship and control, even if this is contradicted in practice, as we’ve seen from other empirical evidence. A contradiction that requires further analysis and that maybe is due – as said – to a lack of competence that originates in turn a need for control from others.

Over 70% of the parents sampled across the four countries (a bit more among the Austrians and the Germans) seem quite convinced (*a lot* and *a fair amount*) about the many opportunities offered by the Internet and also admit the need to acquire more competence to help their children take full advantage of it. Roughly, the same percentage seems quite confident about children’s capacity to understand and avoid the risks of Internet. As usual, the Italians and the Romanians seem a bit less confident, a finding most probably due to a lack of competence that tends to develop a feeling of uncertainty and distrust, and above all to an educational approach that tends to consider children either immature and defenseless or, at the opposite, irresponsible and reckless. Similar data have been collected for the rest of the items.

Drawing some temporary conclusions, from the parents sampled in our survey, we’ve collected empirical evidence that whenever digital competence and a more open attitude towards technological innovation is combined with a relationship with children based on mutual sharing and

participation (at least for the age-group considered in our study), it is more likely that the use of Internet is seen in “instrumental” terms, less ideologically biased so to speak, oriented to improve the general development of their role competences, and not simply technical skills. That is what we can say about the German and the Austrian parents, with some exceptions, though, that do require further investigation and analysis. Whenever this combination does not occur, or better whenever a lower digital competence is combined with a “top-down” pedagogical approach based on control and protection, as with the Romanians and the Italians, it is more likely that the Internet appears as something dangerous and risky, hence requiring a stricter control on children’s uses of it.

### 3. Teachers as “digital immigrants”?

As we’ve observed also for parents, the teachers we interviewed seem to use the internet in “adult” ways, albeit with some minor difference from one country to the other. In all four partner countries, the activities mostly done by them are typical of the “digital immigrants”, as Prensky would put it, whereas the ones usually associated with adolescents (Prensky’s “digital natives”) are almost totally ignored, with the exception of the Romanians.

“Send and receive e-mails” is the most frequently done activity (every day or almost), especially for Austrian and German teachers, followed by “Read and watch the news”, “Work”, “Visit a social network profile” and “Watch video clips”. The rest of the activities are decreasingly done once or twice a week or a month, or even never. “Play videogames”, for instance, with the exception of the Romanians, is either never done or done less than once a month. The “Use of instant messaging” goes roughly along the same lines, although it is more evenly distributed among the different countries. So is the case with “Visiting chat-rooms”. One activity that is never done (not even by the Romanians) is “Spend time in a virtual world”. It seems that, with the exception of visiting social networks, the teachers in our sample use the Internet mostly according to a “push” perspective (for information retrieval, video watching, news reading, etc.). They do not seem enough digitally sophisticated for “pull” uses of the Internet whereby they generate and share content on a horizontal, Web-2.0 basis either for private uses at home or professional ones at school (indeed, it is being increasingly shown that chatrooms, virtual spaces, instant messaging, social networks, mobile phones and even videogames can be proficiently used for teaching, having the competence to do so).

One short comment about “Making purchases”: it is an activity quite commonly done, albeit once or twice a month, or even less, especially for the Italians and the Romanians (who are most probably less familiar with the use of credit cards or other forms of online payment).

As for the Internet activities done explicitly for work, “Exchange mails” and “Prepare classes, tests, etc.” are the activities that almost 60% of the teachers interviewed do either daily or once/twice a week, with the exception of Italians who do that on a monthly basis. “Search for teaching resources” is another quite common activity, although mostly distributed once or twice a month. Other activities, such as “Assign homework requiring the use of Internet” and “Use Internet in class” are less frequent: over 50% of the sample interviewed do that less than once a month or never (once again, Italians appear as the most reluctant to adopt these kinds of uses of Internet while the Austrians and the Romanians are the most willing, showing that the age variable, as we’ve suggested, may make the difference. For example, the Austrians and the Romanians are the ones who access the Internet via mobile phones more than the others). “Exchange messages with students via social networks” is the least frequent activity: roughly 80% of the sample never does that, which makes us conclude that in fact the teachers interviewed seem to be inclined towards more traditional uses of the Internet.

Finally, as for the Internet activities teachers do with students specifically addressing the issues of our project (the opportunity and risks of the Internet), we have observed that in general a good

half of them does the kinds of activity we listed on the questionnaire. In particular, the activity of “encouraging them to explore and learns new things about the Internet” is even done by over 90% of the Germans and the Austrians, followed by the Romanians (74%) and the Italians (56,3%). In fact the Romanians are usually the most willing to do these activities, followed by the Germans, the Austrians and the Italians.

As we did with parents, we asked teachers too about their level of agreement with certain particular statements about Internet benefits. Generally speaking, all teachers across the four countries are well aware of Internet potential for improving learning and teaching processes, albeit with some minor difference from one country to the other.

If we go more into detail, however, we see that this difference is not so minor when it comes to censorship: it does not seem a feasible nor desirable solution to manage students’ uses and access of the Internet to most of the Austrian teachers (70%, adding the two modalities a fair amount/a lot), followed by the Italians (61,2%), the Romanians (48,0%) and, surprisingly, the Germans (27,2%).

As for the level of agreement with the statement “Internet offers many opportunities and I should be more competent”, we notice a similar distribution, with the Austrians on the top of the list and the Germans/Romanians at the bottom.

Teachers seem to have a less clear-cut opinion about their students’ capacity to understand Internet risks: it is distributed across the “not very much”, “a fair amount” and “a lot” modalities, a possible consequence of the superficial knowledge they have of their students’ attitudes towards the Internet.

A quite more definite opinion is the one expressed about on the last three statements: for basically the totality of them Internet is an important source of information and sociality and is also useful for teaching and learning.