

DIGITAL MOBILITY AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION: FORMS OF PARTICIPATION AND SOCIAL PERSPECTIVES AMONG ROMA YOUTH

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Abstract: Based on qualitative empirical research conducted within the framework of the project “Digital Divide and Social Inequalities: Levels, Actors, and Interactions,” funded by the National Science Fund at the Ministry of Education and Science (contract No. КП-06-ПН55/16, 2021), this article explores the role of digital practices in promoting the social inclusion of Roma youth by expanding their opportunities for participation, mobility, and empowerment. The main objective of the study is to examine how access to and engagement with digital technologies can serve as a resource for overcoming structural inequalities and achieving greater social visibility. The theoretical framework combines the concepts of digital inequality, digital capital, intersectionality, and agency, offering a nuanced perspective on digital engagement within contexts of social vulnerability. Drawing on twenty in-depth interviews with Roma youth aged between 18 and 35, selected through an intersectional approach that considers gender, educational attainment, employment status, and place of residence, the study adopts a thematic analysis focused on subjective experiences, individual strategies, and the social meanings attributed to the digital environment. The findings reveal that digital mobility among young Roma is neither linear, universal, nor homogeneous. Instead, it is fragmented, context-dependent, and varies significantly in terms of intensity, usage patterns, and forms of participation—ranging from limited access and passive use, through adaptive and pragmatic digital practices, to transformative engagement characterized by empowerment and active agency. Based on the empirical data, the article proposes a typology of three main types of digital mobility—limited, adaptive, and transformative—visually represented through a triangular model. Particular attention is paid to young Roma women who do not conform to traditional family roles and instead leverage digital technologies for learning, self-expression, professional development, and social participation. The study concludes that digital mobility can act as a significant driver for building autonomy, resilience, and inclusion among marginalized groups. However, it also emphasizes that persistent barriers such as material deprivation, limited institutional support, and enduring stereotypes continue to inhibit equitable access to digital resources. The article calls for the development of targeted educational and social policies that address these disparities, recognize the internal heterogeneity of Roma youth, and promote sustainable pathways to digital empowerment through expanded access, tailored training programs, mentorship initiatives, and active engagement opportunities.

Keywords: *digital mobility, Roma youth, digital inequalities, social inclusion, intersectionality.*

Field: Humanities

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, digital technologies have established themselves as a key factor for social integration, access to education, the labor market, and public services. They have transformed everyday life and opened new avenues for civic participation, including for groups that have traditionally been marginalized. However, access to the internet and the development of digital skills remain uneven, particularly among socially vulnerable groups (van Dijk, 2020; Warschauer, 2003). The issue of the digital divide extends beyond mere connectivity and encompasses a complex configuration of access, skills, and tangible benefits (Helsper, 2012). In other words, inequalities in the digital realm often reflect and reinforce existing social and economic disparities (Stoilova & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2023). Roma communities in Central and Eastern Europe are frequently among those with the lowest levels of digital engagement (FRA, 2020). Although young Roma are generally more active online, they continue to face structural and cultural barriers linked to poverty, unequal access to education, and a lack of digital capital (Ragnedda, 2018). At the same time, the digital environment also holds the potential to overcome some of these barriers, provided that access is accompanied by opportunities for meaningful and empowering participation. While much of the literature focuses on exclusion, this study asks a different question: how do young Roma use the internet not only for communication and entertainment but also as a resource for social mobility? The article focuses on identifying different types of digital mobility and the factors influencing their formation among Roma youth in Bulgaria.

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2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study is based on qualitative empirical methods, specifically a thematic analysis of in-depth interviews, aimed at uncovering how digital practices contribute to the social inclusion of Roma youth by expanding their opportunities for participation and individual mobility. Grounded in the concepts of digital capital (Ragnedda, 2018), lifecourse transitions (Heinz et al., 2009), and digital agency (Lupton, 2015), the research analyzes specific digital practices among Roma youth in Bulgaria, based on in-depth interviews conducted within the project “Digital Divide and Social Inequalities: Levels, Actors, and Interactions,” funded by the National Science Fund at the Ministry of Education and Science. The participants in the study consist of 20 Roma respondents aged between 18 and 35, residing in various regions of Bulgaria. A purposive sampling strategy was applied, employing an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins & Bilge, 2016) in order to represent a diversity of social positions: different educational levels, gender, family status, economic activity, and both urban and rural environments. The selection aimed to capture the variety of experiences related to digital divide and mobility, without claiming representativeness. Within this framework, the internet is viewed as a space of opportunities, where socially vulnerable youth develop alternative forms of belonging, income, and self-identification despite material constraints. Thus, digital mobility is understood not only as a technological advantage, but as a form of agency—of empowerment and the construction of a future (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). The interviews were conducted in 2024, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized in accordance with ethical guidelines (BSA, 2017). The study has an exploratory character and does not aim for statistical generalization. Its main strength lies in providing a detailed analysis of the meanings that participants assign to their digital practices and revealing the conditions under which digital mobility becomes a means for overcoming social vulnerability.

3. RESULTS

In recent years, the development of digital technologies has both deepened social inequalities and created new pathways for participation and mobility. The concept of the digital divide no longer refers solely to the availability of internet access, but also encompasses complex social, cultural, and economic differences that shape how people use technologies and with what outcomes (Hargittai, 2002; van Dijk, 2020; Warschauer, 2003). Helsper (2012, 2021) develops the so-called corresponding fields model, according to which social and digital inequalities are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing—not only through access but also through the cultural and institutional resources that users possess. This is particularly evident among young people in vulnerable communities, where physical access may exist, but skills, cultural capital, and institutional support are limited (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007; Seale, 2009). In the case of Roma youth, these limitations are compounded by multiple layers of social barriers—poverty, discrimination, unequal access to quality education, and limited employment opportunities. Research by Mascheroni and Siibak (2021) highlights that in a context of “datafied childhoods,” young people not only consume content but also construct digital identities, practices, and worldviews, which can be critical for their future social inclusion or exclusion. In this regard, Ragnedda (2018, 2022) develops the concept of digital capital, inspired by Bourdieu’s (1986) theories, which posits that access and skills in the digital realm can be converted into other forms of capital—educational, economic, and cultural. However, this capital is unevenly distributed and accumulates under specific conditions of social support, environment, and individual initiative. Digital inequalities arise not only from a lack of technology but also from the absence of opportunities for meaningful participation and the transfer of digital skills into other social domains (Helsper, 2021). The concept of digital mobility builds upon these ideas, emphasizing individuals’ ability to use digital technologies for social advancement and empowerment, including in the spheres of education, employment, entrepreneurship, and access to institutions (Ragnedda & Muschert, 2013). Among young Roma, digital mobility can be understood as an alternative route for overcoming social marginalization, particularly when traditional channels of upward mobility are blocked or inaccessible. The application of an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins & Bilge, 2016) allows for an analysis of how ethnicity, age, gender, and social status interact to shape differing conditions for digital inclusion. For example, Roma youth from rural areas with low levels of education face not only technical but also cultural barriers that limit their confidence and opportunities for participation. Rather than viewing vulnerable youth as passive recipients of exclusion, this study draws on the concept of agency—the capacity to act in spite of structural constraints (Lupton, 2015). This implies attention to “bottom-up” strategies through which young people use digital tools for learning, communication, small services, or micro-entrepreneurship. As Eubanks (2018) emphasizes, technology often reinforces inequalities but can

also be “reclaimed” by marginalized groups as a tool for voice, presence, and change. The analysis of the in-depth interviews reveals a complex and heterogeneous picture of how Roma youth experience digital space. Despite sharing similar social positions, the participants demonstrate varying levels of digital access, skills, and usage, closely linked to their socio-economic status, education, gender, and place of residence. For most respondents, digital technologies are available primarily in the form of a smartphone with mobile internet, while stationary access or computer use is limited or completely absent. One 19-year-old unemployed Roma participant stated: “I have mobile internet. No fixed internet. I don’t have a computer or tablet, just a phone... The reason I don’t have fixed internet is because I don’t have a separate room or a computer at home.” This highlights the significance of material and spatial conditions within the household. In contrast, another participant—a 26-year-old Roma activist and municipal employee—had full access to digital devices: “I have various digital devices like a smartphone, laptop, tablet... At work and in the office I use a desktop computer with fixed internet.” Despite resource limitations, nearly all participants use the internet daily and see it as a key tool for connection, information, and opportunity. For some, the internet is an integral part of their personal and professional development. One example is an unmarried young Roma woman engaged in various activities. She uses the internet regularly and says: „I find information online, sometimes I search for jobs...“. Her case illustrates how the online environment functions simultaneously as a source of knowledge and social orientation, even when resources and institutional support are limited. The respondents’ digital skills range from basic to advanced, yet a common pattern emerges: digital literacy is predominantly developed outside formal education. Self-directed learning and mutual support within the community are the prevailing mechanisms. As one 17-year-old Roma youth explains: “Whatever I don’t know, I ask here in the neighbourhood... we learned in school, but you quickly forget.” A 24-year-old young mother of two small children adds, “I taught myself through trial and error. No one showed me, I just watch and search.” Even in the absence of confident computer use, mobile platforms provide respondents with a sense of autonomy and control over everyday information and communication. Nonetheless, social inequalities remain evident. Educational disparities are decisive in shaping how the internet is used. A young Roma man, who graduated in Public Administration, not only uses the internet, but actively participates in administrative processes and projects concerning the Roma community: “I organise meetings, send documents, find information. Without the internet, I would not be able to work.” For him, digital literacy is a necessity for institutional work, whereas for others, internet use remains limited to social media and video content. Some respondents explicitly state that digital skills would be useful, but they lack the means to develop them due to the absence of equipment, financial resources, or time: “I would attend a course if it were free... but since I don’t have a computer, I would forget everything again. How can I practise?” comments a young Roma woman living in a rural area. This logic demonstrates that the acquisition of digital capital is inextricably linked to material resources and opportunities for practical application – a notion supported by Ragnedda (2018) and Helsper (2012). Although some participants do not fully exploit the opportunities provided by the digital environment, the desire for inclusion is strongly expressed. Young respondents often perceive the internet not as a “luxury,” but as an essential tool for the future, including for working abroad or starting a small business: “I’m going to pick grapes in France. I need the internet to stay in touch with my parents and to stay informed,” says a 20-year-old Roma man. Another member of the Roma community, a hairdresser by profession, uses Facebook and TikTok to reach clients. These examples illustrate that the internet has become an infrastructure for everyday mobility – social, economic, and communicative. In this context, digital mobility among Roma youth does not follow a linear trajectory; it is fragmented and often improvised, yet it simultaneously reflects agency, adaptation, and a desire for inclusion. For some, the internet is a key to professional realisation; for others, it serves as a means to stay connected to the world or to escape marginality. Despite social constraints, the participants demonstrate active digital practices that merit attention as emerging forms of participation and the construction of digital capital under conditions of inequality. The findings suggest that, beyond serving as a tool for communication and access to information, digital mobility brings significant psycho-social benefits related to personal development, the building of self-confidence, and the broadening of life horizons. In contemporary settings, the ability to navigate and actively engage in the digital environment not only creates new opportunities for education and employment, but also contributes to the formation of self-esteem, identity, and a sense of social adequacy (Selwyn, 2004; Livingstone & Helsper, 2007).

For many respondents, the digital world serves as an “infrastructure of normality” – a way to integrate into what is perceived as contemporary, “modern” life. A young, unmarried Roma woman, engaged in various activities, states: “If you want to keep up – you need to know how to navigate online. Otherwise, you’re lost.” Her statement can be interpreted in light of Couldry and Hepp’s argument, according to which digital presence has become a fundamental mechanism for the “mediated construction of reality” – that

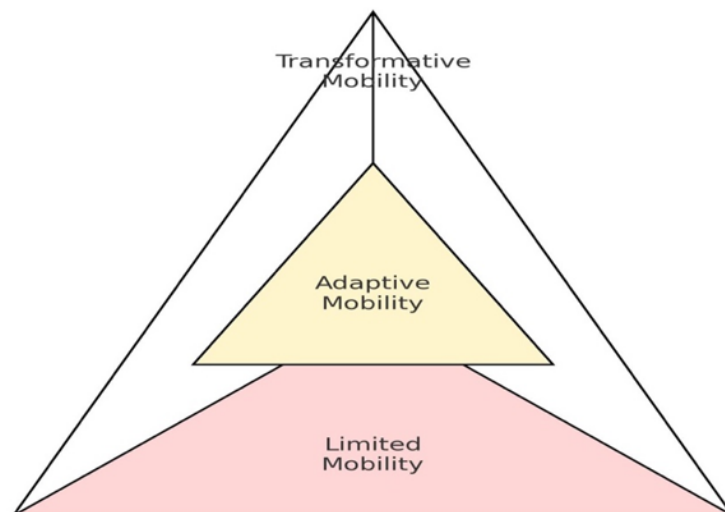
is, one's existence in society is unthinkable without digital visibility (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). At the same time, the self-directed acquisition of digital skills – even when partial and informal – fosters a sense of competence that counteracts deeply rooted feelings of inferiority, often experienced by young people in vulnerable positions (Ragnedda, 2018; Seale, 2009). A young Roma mother of a small child shares: “Before, I didn't even know how to open an email. Now I search for recipes by myself, shop on my phone, and learn new things.” This experience reflects the empowerment that arises from digital self-learning, which, according to Warschauer (2003), is among the most effective means of social integration in the absence of institutional support. Respondents who use the internet to engage in micro-entrepreneurship or enhance their professional visibility demonstrate the highest levels of digital mobility. A young Roma man working as a hairdresser uses Facebook and TikTok as showcases for his work: “Before, I used to wait for someone to tell me where there was work. Now I upload photos, and people message me.” This illustrates how digital capital (Ragnedda, 2018) can be transformed into a tangible social and economic resource, particularly when employed in a strategic and creative context. In this way, the internet does not merely compensate for deficiencies, but opens new pathways for development and social recognition. At the same time, participation in the digital sphere also fosters new forms of civic awareness and social inclusion. A young Roma activist with administrative experience shares: “With the internet, I can help, organise meetings, be part of something. Without it, it's like you don't exist.” This aligns with Eubanks' (2018) observation that in the digital age, presence in the online space is a precondition for social legitimacy, but once mastered, it can also be utilised for collective action. On a conceptual level, these examples illustrate that digital mobility functions as a cultural and social trajectory through which individuals develop skills, self-confidence, and new visions for the future. According to Buckingham and Willett, digital technologies not only alter modes of communication but also reshape pathways of personal growth and transitions in youth (Buckingham & Willett, 2006). In this sense, although uneven, digital mobility among Roma youth contains the potential for new forms of empowerment and expression that transcend traditional models of social mobility. Traditional social roles, especially within the family, still influence some respondents. However, the analysis shows that many young Roma break away from the stereotypical patterns commonly attributed to their background. A number of the interviews include young individuals, including women, who are unmarried, have no children, and are not bound by domestic or caregiving responsibilities, yet demonstrate high levels of digital activity. For these respondents, digital mobility is not an “instrument for adaptation” to an existing family structure, but rather a means of building autonomy, self-confidence, and control over their future. They use the internet for learning, communication, access to information, and at times – for developing a personal brand or social position. It is precisely within their profiles that the digital realm becomes a space for experimenting with identity, belonging, and personal freedom, rather than merely a technology for meeting everyday needs. Particularly telling is the case of a young, unmarried Roma woman, engaged in various activities and free from family obligations. She states: “I love watching different things, reading. Often, I know more than the people around me.” For her, the internet is not just a source of information, but a symbolic resource through which she constructs authority, critical thinking, and new horizons for social participation. This challenges the widespread perception of Roma women as passive and traditionally oriented, positioning her instead as an active subject of knowledge and cultural production. Similar examples are found among other young respondents who live independently or lead non-familial lifestyles, and who do not identify through roles such as “daughter,” “mother,” or “wife,” but through their digital engagement, creative activities, or personal projects. In this way, digital mobility functions not only as a technological process but as a new field of self-awareness and social positioning, in which young people can assume roles beyond those defined by tradition, ethnocentric stereotypes, or institutional expectations. These observations call into question the universality of the category “Roma woman” in the context of digital inequality. Rather than viewing this group as homogeneous, the analysis suggests internal differentiation and variability that are essential for understanding how the digital becomes a space for individual agency and social renewal. An approach that combines intersectionality with attention to biographical individuality reveals a new perspective: Roma women are not merely social roles; they are digital actors – critical, adaptable, at times invisible, but increasingly autonomous. In this context, digital mobility should be understood not only as “technical access” or a “learning resource,” but as a dynamic and socially significant form of self-expression, inclusion, and transformation that disrupts the boundaries of pre-assigned identities. For Roma youth – both women and men – the digital space offers the possibility to become something else: more free, more connected, more visible. Based on the interviews, we can distinguish different types of digital mobility that reflect not only levels of access and skills but also the ways in which the digital environment is integrated into personal life, self-identification, and social participation among young Roma. The resulting empirical typology shows that digital mobility is not one-dimensional, but varies in terms of intensity, awareness, and transformative potential. As

illustrated in Figure 1, three main types can be identified:

- **Limited mobility**, characteristic of respondents with low resources and skills, where the internet is used primarily for entertainment or basic communication;
- **Adaptive mobility**, where digital technologies are used pragmatically and in response to specific needs – for learning, work, shopping, or staying informed;
- **Transformative mobility**, where the digital environment becomes a space for self-development, visibility, and the construction of new social roles.

This visual framework summarises the diverse digital trajectories along which young Roma navigate and highlights the role of the digital as a social resource, activated to varying degrees depending on context, gender, personal motivation, and supportive environments.

Figure 1. Types of Digital Mobility among Young Roma



Source: Author's own elaboration based on empirical data, visualised through a triangular model

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide important empirical grounds for viewing digital technologies not merely as tools for access or communication, but as platforms for identity formation, self-education, and symbolic mobility among youth from marginalised communities. As Selwyn (2022) notes, digital technologies play a dual role – both as instruments for integration and as sources of new challenges to social justice. In the case of young Roma, digital mobility appears as a contextually driven phenomenon that reflects, but also questions, structural inequalities. The typology developed herein serves as an empirical framework for understanding the diversity of digital experiences within a vulnerable social group. The data do not confirm the so-called “deficit model,” but rather reveal agency, creativity, and strategic adaptation in digital practices, even under conditions of economic insecurity and social marginalisation. The presence of young Roma – particularly women – who do not follow traditional social roles and who use digital tools for self-learning, communication, or even entrepreneurship, challenges widely held assumptions of cultural passivity or technological exclusion. These young people reimagine the digital space as a field of autonomy and opportunity, even when access is limited to mobile devices. The significance of these observations lies not merely in the fact that technologies are used, but in how they are appropriated to reshape everyday life, social relations, and future horizons. This research contributes to the growing body of scholarly literature that views digital inclusion as a complex, dynamic, and evolving process, shaped by individual motivation, social constraints, and contextual resources. The proposed model of digital mobility enables a more nuanced reading of digital engagement, especially in intersectional contexts where ethnicity, gender, age, and social status interact in specific ways. Recognising these dynamics is essential for developing interventions that go beyond mere access provision, and instead support meaningful participation, digital agency, and sustainable empowerment.

5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that digital mobility among young Roma in Bulgaria is a multidimensional and dynamic phenomenon, which cannot be reduced to mere access or lack of access to technology. Instead, the analysis of the interviews reveals diverse trajectories of engagement with the digital environment, influenced by factors such as education, gender, social status, motivation, and individual initiative. The young respondents exhibit varying degrees of digital capital, ranging from basic, passive use to the strategic appropriation of online resources to achieve specific goals: employment, communication, visibility, learning, or civic participation. In this context, digital mobility does not simply reflect the social position of these youths, but often becomes a tool for rethinking and transforming that position. Particular attention was given to the role of Roma women, who in many cases do not conform to traditional roles, but instead use the digital environment to build autonomy and personal authority. This agency, expressed through digital activity, highlights the need to move beyond stereotypes and to account for intra-group heterogeneity in the study of social inequalities. The proposed model of three types of digital mobility (Figure 1) contributes to the development of educational and social policies targeted at vulnerable youth. Support for digital inclusion should be considered not only from a technical perspective, but also through cultural, gendered, and social lenses, with a focus on active participation, informal learning, and the promotion of digital empowerment. In conclusion, digital mobility among Roma youth is not merely a reflection of inequalities – it represents a potential means for overcoming them, provided it is recognised, supported, and cultivated as both a social and personal resource. While the study provides valuable insights into the digital practices of Roma youth, its qualitative nature and limited sample size mean that the findings should not be generalized, but rather understood as illustrative of broader trends and individual trajectories.

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