



Digital Competences: Challenges or Opportunities for the Development of Social Intelligence in Teenagers

Lilia Țurcan-Balță¹; Elena Bîrsan²

Abstract: The extensive use of new information technologies can have a profound impact on teenagers' personality development. These technologies have the potential to reshape how they communicate, access information, and engage with their surroundings. Additionally, they can also influence cultural norms and values, as digital platforms provide new avenues for expression and exchange of ideas. Understanding the relationship between the individual and his representation in the virtual environment requires in-depth comprehension of the virtual world inhabited by today's youth. Information technologies are a part of our daily lives, making it unquestionably important for adults, teenagers, and children to develop digital competences. Systematic usage of these information resources can have positive and negative effects on the development of social intelligence in teenagers.

Keywords: digital competences; social intelligence; virtual world; teenagers

Introduction

In the past few years, there has been an increased focus on the notion of competences, especially digital competences. The ubiquity of digital technologies has profoundly changed almost all aspects of our lives: the way we communicate, the way we work, the way we enjoy our leisure time, the way we organize our lives, and the way we source knowledge and information, etc. It has changed how

¹ Associate professor, PhD, "Ion Creangă" State Pedagogical University of Chisinau, Republic of Moldova, Address: Ion Creangă Street 1, Chisinau, Republic of Moldova. Corresponding author: lilianaturcan25@yahoo.com.

² Associate professor, PhD, "Ion Creangă" State Pedagogical University of Chisinau, Republic of Moldova, Address: Ion Creangă Street 1, Chisinau, Republic of Moldova., E-mail: elena.birsan32@yahoo.com.

we think and how we behave. Children and young adults are growing up in a world where digital technologies are ubiquitous. This does not mean, however, that they are naturally equipped with the right skills to use digital technologies effectively and conscientiously (DigCompEdu, 2017, p. 95). Therefore, it is of paramount importance to precisely delineate and elucidate the conceptual framework of the notion of “digital competence”.

The concept of digital competence was initially introduced in the year 1990 and has been an increasingly-debated and discussed topic since the publication of Paul Glistler’s “Digital Literacy” in 1997. In recent years, it has become increasingly evident that mandating digital skills training is of immense value to various industries, including the field of education. It is worth mentioning the fact that one of the key competences stipulated in the Council Recommendations on key competences for lifelong learning is the digital competence which involves “the confident, critical and responsible use of, and engagement with, digital technologies for learning, at work, and for participation in society. It includes information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, media literacy, digital content creation (including programming), safety (including digital well-being and competences related to cyber security), intellectual property related questions, problem solving and critical thinking” (UNION, 2018). Therefore, the term “digital competence” refers to a combination of abilities and knowledge related to the use of new technologies.

Currently, being digitally competent means being able to interact, communicate, publish, and access information from a variety of places. It requires the capacity to comprehend and apply data supplied by a computer in a variety of formats and from a wide variety of sources. It’s important to understand that this kind of competence involves more than just keyboard proficiency; it also denotes the ability to grasp ideas and information. Digital competences encompass “integrated systems of knowledge, abilities, skills, attitudes, and values, which are acquired and enhanced through the learning process, and enable an individual to effectively solve diverse issues that may arise during the collection, storage, processing, and dissemination of information through information and communication technologies (Moldova, 2015, p. 3). Therefore, it is crucial to develop responsible digital citizens who will make positive contributions to the society in general, and digital world in particular.

The importance of digital competences has also been acknowledged in the Republic of Moldova. Thus, according to M. Paiu, digital competence refers to the

ability to locate, copy, assess, process, present, produce, store, and exchange information using computers and other technologies, as well as to collaborate with others using the Internet and other available technologies (Paiu, 2020). In this regard, V. Cabac elucidates that digital competence incorporates an individual's objective capacity to select and integrate specific resources, to act wisely in order to effectively address a given situation (Cabac, 2006). But how can we describe an individual who is "digitally competent"? The European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens, also known as DigComp¹, outlines five areas that describe what it means to be "digital savvy":

- 1). *Information processing* (identify, locate, retrieve, store, organize and analyze digital information, judging its relevance and purpose);
- 2). *Communication* (communicate in digital environments, share resources through online tools, link with others and collaborate through digital tools, interact with and participate in communities and networks);
- 3). *Content creation* (create and edit new educational content);
- 4). *Safety* (personal data protection, digital identity protection, security measures);
- 5). *Problem solving* (identify digital needs and resources, make informed decisions as to which are the most appropriate digital tools according to the purpose or need, solve conceptual problems through digital means, creatively use technologies, solve technical problems).

As it is commonly acknowledged, digital skills are also a critical component of lifelong learning, given the ever-increasing reliance on technology in most industries. Hence, the development of digital competences is imperative for adolescents in order to prepare them for their future professional endeavors.

On a related note, digital competence refers to the set of knowledge, skills, attitudes, including strategies and values, needed to use technology and digital media to perform tasks, solve problems, collaborate, and build knowledge. It requires being effective, appropriate, critical, creative, autonomous, flexible, ethical, and reflexive for work, leisure, participation in society, learning, and socializing. On the whole, digital competence refers to the development of abilities and the capacity to use a particular set of tools and/or applications (Chiriac, 2007, pp. 9-17).

¹ https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/ro/pub/viewpoints/experts/riina_vuorikari_-_becoming_dig.htm.

In the specialized literature, the concept of digital competence is examined through numerous aspects; it includes dimensions that represent the amalgamation of several rapidly evolving domains as new digital technologies emerge. Today, being digitally competent means more than just being able to use the newest devices (phones, tablets, etc.) and software; it also means being able to find relevant information, analyze web content critically and creatively, communicate with others using a variety of digital tools and applications, recognize that media is a digital habitat, protect one's online identity, and display ethical behavior.

Another factor that should be taken into consideration is the fact that "digital competence, as a transversal competence, helps us master other key competences, such as communication, language competences, or the fundamental ones in mathematics and science," as noted by R. Vuorikari. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated the need for advanced digital competences across all domains, particularly in education, an aspect highlighted in the Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027) ¹, which recognizes the urgency to equip students and educators with the necessary digital skills to adapt to remote learning environments. It emphasizes the importance of investing in digital infrastructure and resources to ensure equal access to quality education for all.

Over the years, intelligence has often been identified with the process of thinking. It is imperative to acknowledge that the term "intelligent" originates from the Latin word "*intelligentia*," which merges the connotations of "to distinguish/differentiate" and "to connect/combine," indicating that intelligence surpasses mere thought ². It is widely accepted that Cicero was the one who introduced this term to literature. The study of intelligence is one of the broadest and most important fields within psychology. Success in human endeavors has always aroused curiosity, which is perhaps why studies of human intelligence have been pursued since antiquity. For instance, according to the Greek classics, the key factor in determining a person's intelligence is their capacity for logical reasoning. For others, linguistic or mathematical reasoning skills were pivotal. Today, nevertheless, it is widely agreed upon that the main characteristic of people possessing superior intellectual ability is their capacity to adjust to the environment, even though this ability might manifest itself in a variety of ways depending on the surrounding circumstances. Additionally, it is now widely

¹ <https://education.ec.europa.eu/ro/focus-topics/digital-education/action-plan>.

² <https://eduform.snsh.ro/baza-de-date-online-cubune-practicipentrueducatieincludivadeccalitate/teoria-inteligentelor-multiple>.

acknowledged that this is not a singular characteristic, but a complex combination of various attributes that must coexist in order to effectively address challenges¹. Social intelligence may be regarded as a fundamental social skill based on person's development and level of expertise across different fields. Thorndike (1920) defined social intelligence as "the ability to understand and manage other people, and act wisely in human relations". The author divides a person's intelligence into three facets, pertaining to the ability to understand and manage ideas (abstract intelligence), concrete objects (mechanical intelligence), and people (social intelligence) (Robu, 2013). Social intelligence is a relationship-based construct. It centers on the way we interact with others. The ability to engage in social interaction is critical in all phases of life, but particularly so during adolescence as the development of new social relationships is a key aspect of adolescence.

Research has revealed that there are several types of intelligence that correspond to the complex and diverse nature of our society. It is imperative that our society is equipped with individuals who possess the ability to effectively manage all demands, regardless of their complexity. H. Gardner's proposed forms of intelligence have been replicated by K. Albrecht in a model that is lauded for its practicality and applicability in a professional setting. The various dimensions of intelligence that individuals possess are concretized through the ASPEAK model:

- ✓ *Abstract intelligence* (A) - conceptual reasoning, manipulating verbal, mathematical and symbolic information.
- ✓ *Socialintelligence* (S) - interacting successfully with others in various contexts;
- ✓ *Practical intelligence* (P) - the ability to solve problems & get things done;
- ✓ *Emotional intelligence* (E) - self-insight and the ability to regulate or manage one's reactions to experience;
- ✓ *Aesthetic intelligence* (A) - appreciation of form, design and relationships;
- ✓ *Kinesthetic intelligence* (K) - whole-body competence, which facilitates the enhancement of particular skills (Iliciev, 2023, p. 21).

As can be seen, social intelligence, which is the intelligence behind social interactions, is one of the dimensions recognized in the ASPEAK model. It is noteworthy that social intelligence serves various functions including the dynamic replication, safeguarding, and dissemination of scientific and cultural principles; the initial and ongoing education of economists and cultural anthropologists; the

¹ <https://ro.warbletoncouncil.org/que-es-la-inteligencia-1746>.

development of a creative personality, and the acquisition of skills and attitudes necessary for professional and social activities. Furthermore, social intelligence serves to fulfill the educational prerequisites of individuals while also playing a pivotal role in the establishment of national consciousness and identity. Additionally, it facilitates the cultivation of a national culture and promotes constructive intercultural dialogues. Some of these functions are also stipulated in the educational policy documents of the Republic of Moldova, particularly in Article 6 of the Education Code which delineates the educational ideal of Moldovan schools.

Similarly, S. Cristea, a researcher from Romania, posits that the main function of social intelligence is to effectively use all cognitive and non-cognitive, intrapersonal and interpersonal abilities that are involved in the development of an enhanced social competence. Such competence is acknowledged at the level of social awareness (Cristea, 2021), which enable individuals to understand and navigate social situations. We strongly believe that social intelligence plays an important role in optimizing the cognitive abilities and personal growth of students, especially adolescents. Social intelligence research supports the idea that humans have a cognitive brain and a social brain. The two are intricately linked and are actively involved in the process of learning. We acknowledge that beyond social relations, a correlation exists between social intelligence and academic achievement. Specifically, social intelligence moderates the connection between cognitive ability and academic performance. During adolescence, the interplay between these two constructs is of great significance, as it influences both academic success and the development of peer relationships. This aspect is particularly vital during adolescence.

In this context, social intelligence encompasses not only the ability to establish rapport and build relationships, but also to understand and adapt to different social dynamics and contexts. While F. Moss & T. Hunt (Illiciev, 2023), concisely define social intelligence as the “ability to get along with others”, P. E. Vernon (1933) on the other hand, provided the most wide-ranging definition of social intelligence. According to them, social intelligence is “ability to get along with people in general, social technique or ease in society, knowledge of social matters, susceptibility to stimuli from other members of a group, as well as insight into the temporary moods or underlying personality traits of strangers”. Social intelligence, in P. Popescu-Neveanu’ view, implies a particular kind of intelligence that is associated with the effectiveness and quality of social adaptation, interpersonal skills,

and the ability to solve psychosocial problems. J.P. Guilford & M. O'Sullivan have defined social intelligence as "the ability to understand other people's thoughts, feelings, and intentions". Additionally, social intelligence involves an individual's competence to understand one's environment and react appropriately. This entails the ability to anticipate and respond flexibly to any social situation (Robu, 2013). In relation to social intelligence R. Sternberg executed a number of applied tests and subsequently revisited the concept initially presented by American psychologist E. Thorndike. Thorndike argued that social intelligence is separate from academic intelligence and is a pivotal element for individuals to deliver effective solutions in practical situations encountered in daily life. This particular aspect leads us towards the examination of scholarly research in psychology, which reveals that social intelligence is not solely limited to cognitive abilities but encompasses a wider range of skills and knowledge (Iliciev, 2023, p. 126).

The specialized literature discloses various models of social intelligence. The model proposed by K. Albrecht (2006), defines social intelligence as "the ability to get along well with others while winning their cooperation". This concept has been extensively studied within the realm of the "new science of success" (Cristea, 2021). Basic research highlights the dual nature of social intelligence, which is influenced by both biological and social factors. While individuals as biological creatures have the ability to adapt to their environment, as personalities and active subjects of the society, they also have the ability to reorganize their social environment. Regarding social intelligence, from the ideographic and psychometric perspectives, they both mutually reinforce and supplement the construct of personality with ideal-oriented cognitive-affective manifestations as substantiated by investigations conducted by Walter & Yuichi, Ross & Nisbett, and Baragh.

Through education and self-education, teachers can cultivate their social intelligence and enhance their social skills. These skills include the ability to decode emotions from facial expressions, to develop primary empathy for rapport building and problem exploration, and the recognize pedagogically relevant microexpressions in real-life situations. A teacher's social competence is further enhanced through cognitive empathy necessary for achieving a higher level of social intelligence. This can be achieved through the establishment of psychological synchronization, attentive mutual listening, and ongoing empathic concern, which can facilitate the optimization of pedagogical communication based on the level of message assimilation by all students (Cristea, 2021, pp. 118-122).

Studying social intelligence can provide insights into how people use their abilities, knowledge, memory, and problem-solving skills in their social interactions. Combined with the cognitive-affective processing system of personality, social intelligence research examines the emotional framework necessary for successful social interactions. This aligns with the conceptualization of personality as a cognitive-affective processing system. By researching social intelligence, we can comprehend the constructs we create by identifying the cognitive-affective processes that are involved in social perception. Furthermore, understanding social intelligence can also help us identify and address biases and stereotypes that may hinder effective communication and collaboration in diverse social settings.

Social knowledge comprises both conceptual and procedural components. Conceptual knowledge includes understanding societal expectations and cultural norms, while procedural knowledge involves knowing how to apply this knowledge in specific social situations. In this context, Ross and Nisbett (1991) identify three contributions of social psychology that have significantly influenced the study of the individual and society: the power and subtlety of situational influences on behavior; the need to recognize the subjective nature of situational influence; and the utility of regarding both individual psyches and social groups as “tension systems.” These contributions have revolutionized our understanding of human behavior by highlighting the importance of situational factors in shaping individual actions.

Therefore, a relationship can be noticed between the ideal-oriented cognitive-affective model of personality and social intelligence as a personality component. The ideal-oriented cognitive-affective model of personality suggests that individuals who are highly motivated to achieve their ideals and values are more likely to possess higher levels of social intelligence. Understanding and acknowledging one’s responsibilities toward social environment are two ways in which social intelligence can be expressed. In this sense, social intelligence is connected to a number of phenomena through which different levels of understanding of social mechanisms are built: the ability to recognize the assets and liabilities of people, organizations, and the connections among them, as well as their history, nature, and their current level of competition. Social intelligence focuses on understanding and improving interpersonal interactions by considering the social and economic dynamics that shape them. By analyzing and adapting to these factors, social intelligence seeks to foster meaningful and sustainable relationships between individuals. Empirical evidence has shown that developing

social intelligence can lead to enhanced self-awareness, empathy, and the ability to understand and respond to the needs of others.

Research in the field of social intelligence highlights the subsequent functions of social intelligence: (a) *cognitive-evaluative function*; (b) *communicative function*; and (c) *reflexive-corrective function*. These functions play a central role in facilitating the establishment of a permanent correlation between individuals and their social environment and their relevance and applicability vary at different stages of an activity, with the cognitive-evaluative function taking on a dominant role in the early stages while the other two functions set the necessary condition (Iliciev, 2014, pp. 112-117).

The American author, Sternberg R., expounded on the structure of social intelligence and emphasized the following components:

- ✓ *problem-solving ability*, whereby the person demonstrates logical and rational judgment, comprehends all aspects of the issue, makes efficient decisions, uses reliable sources of information, considers all arguments, etc.;
- ✓ *verbal ability*, manifesting in clear and articulate speech, comprehension of the essence of written material, a vast vocabulary, mastery of written language, and effective communication with others;
- ✓ *social competence*, characterized by unconditional acceptance of others, punctuality, impartiality in judgments, sensitivity to the needs and desires of others, and a diverse set of interests (Iliciev, 2023, p. 94).

Relevant in this context is the research conducted by P. Ackerman, R. Kanfer & R. Schneider in 1996. The research subjects were asked to articulate actions that were considered to be suitable for social competence. As a result of the study, Schneider, Ackerman & Kanfer reported that social competence has several independent dimensions such as extraversion, warmth, social influence, social openness, social appropriateness, social maladjustment and social insight.

In the same context, Goleman's (2006) divides social intelligence into two broad categories: social awareness, what we sense about others (emotions, thoughts) and social facility, what we then do with that awareness. *Social awareness* involves primal empathy (feeling with others, sensing non-verbal emotional signals), attunement (active listening), empathic accuracy (the ability to infer another person's inner states), social cognition (knowing how the social world works). *Social facility* builds on social awareness to allow smooth, effective interactions and involves synchrony (interacting smoothly at the non-verbal level), self-

presentation (presenting ourselves in ways that make a desired impression), influence (shaping the outcome of social situations), concern (perceiving the needs of others and engaging in appropriate actions in response) (Iliciev, 2023).

It is crucial to acknowledge that social intelligence entails more than just identifying situations and the social mechanisms that govern them. It also involves understanding communication patterns and techniques that aid individuals in building interpersonal relationships. Effective communication involves not only understanding the content of a message but also being able to interpret nonverbal cues and emotions.

Another concept that is increasingly gaining prominence is that of successful intelligence, which emphasizes the practical application of knowledge and skills in real-life situations. It involves not only problem-solving abilities but also adaptability, creativity, and the capacity to learn from experience. For an improved understanding of the concept of successful intelligence, R.J. Sternberg proposes a three-dimensional model that highlights the complex nature of social intelligence. According to Sternberg's model, successful intelligence is comprised of analytical, creative, and practical abilities. These three dimensions work together to enable individuals to adapt and excel in different social contexts. By considering the interplay between these dimensions, Sternberg's model provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of social intelligence.

According to the research conducted by the aforementioned authors, it can be inferred that the emergence of social intelligence and social reasoning is contingent upon historical laws. These historical laws shape the societal norms and values that influence individuals' social interactions. As a result, individuals begin to comprehend social reality only when they seek to gain comprehension. Seeking comprehension allows individuals to actively engage with the complexities of social reality, leading to a deeper understanding and awareness of the world around them. The formation of teenagers' personalities is significantly influenced by the development of social intelligence, a major component of social education and a fundamental feature of the instructive-educational process. Social intelligence helps adolescents to form healthy relationships, make informed decisions, and contribute positively to their communities. Additionally, social intelligence helps them develop a sense of self-awareness and emotional regulation, enabling them to manage conflicts and adapt to various social environments.

K. Bjorkqvist, K. Osterman & A. Kaukiainen, in 2000, stated that social intelligence is a multidimensional construct, consisting of three distinct components: perceptual, cognitive-analytical, and behavioral (Robu, 2013, p. 212). The perceptual component involves accurately perceiving and interpreting social cues, while the cognitive-analytical component involves analyzing and understanding the motives and intentions of others. Finally, the behavioral component encompasses the ability to adapt one's behavior in response to different social contexts.

According to S. Moscovici's perspective in 1998, social competence comprises various sub-skills such as communication, assertiveness, empathy, support, self-presentation, and problem solving.

✓ *Communication*: at the core of social competence lies the process of verbal communication, with a remarkable emphasis on nonverbal communication and its various components and social signals;

✓ *Assertiveness* is a skill that involves the ability to persuade others to act in accordance with our expectations. It allows us to establish healthy boundaries, communicate effectively, and build strong relationships based on mutual understanding and respect;

✓ *Social competence* is reliant upon a cohesive relationship between communication and empathy. By combining effective communication skills with empathy, individuals can navigate social interactions with greater ease and build stronger relationships;

✓ *Gratuity and support*: according to experts in the field, the foundation of friendship and personal sympathy is rooted in gratuity and support, which can manifest in various forms. Communicative support, for instance, encompasses aspects such as consecration, acceptance, understanding, agreement, affection, and encouragement. On the other hand, non-verbal compensations could be demonstrated through smiling, bowing of the head, and intonation;

✓ *Self-presentation*: representatives within the field of social psychology acknowledge the significance of self-presentation as a remarkable goal of social competence. This objective is not only limited to the context of self-respect exhibited by the interlocutors but also extends to the establishment of a demonstrative behavioral model for others. These factors can be classified as benchmarks of social intelligence.

✓ *Problem-solving*, which serves as the foundation of social competence, is a multifaceted construct that encompasses an array of problem-solving skills. The proficient management of problematic situations is achieved through training (Iliciev, 2023).

From a pedagogical perspective, the importance of adolescence lies in the establishment of self-concept, identity, and social orientation. Complex intrapersonal and interpersonal skills play a critical role in facilitating the adolescent's adaptation to society. Considering the present era, the integration of teenagers into society without digital skills seems implausible.

The use of information and communication technologies can enhance teenagers' social intelligence by providing them with a wealth of knowledge and perspectives from around the world. This exposure can broaden their understanding of different cultures, opinions, and social issues, enabling them to develop empathy, social awareness, and problem-solving skills. However, it is important to note that excessive reliance on these resources may also hinder teenagers' ability to engage in face-to-face interactions and develop essential social competences. The temptation of the virtual world, which includes gambling, violent video games, inappropriate images for some age groups, and the influence of strange people, can have a significant negative effect on a teenager. This may cause teenagers to give less consideration to their future educational prospects, their guiding principles in life, and even resort to aberrant social conduct. Therefore, finding a balance between online engagement and real-life experiences is crucial for their overall development. The complex development of the adolescent personality is possible through the development of cultural skills, which raise emotional intelligence levels and promote the development of social intelligence. While technology offers various benefits and opportunities, it is equally important for adolescents to engage in face-to-face interactions, develop social competences, and explore the real world. Striking this balance will ensure that they can harness the power of technology while also fostering their personal growth and well-being.

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