

Bridging or Bonding? The Dual Role of Social Network Sites in the Intercultural Adaptation of Young Migrants in Italy (Note 1)

Monica Banzato (Corresponding author)

Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Culturali Comparati

Ca' Foscari University, Venice, Italy

E-mail: banzato@unive.it

Graziano Serragiotto

Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Culturali Comparati

Ca' Foscari University, Venice, Italy

E-mail: graziano.serragiotto@unive.it

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Abstract

This study explores the role of Social Network Sites (SNSs) in the intercultural adaptation processes of migrant adolescents in Italy, with a focus on their function in socio-cultural and linguistic acculturation. Using a quantitative approach, we analyzed differences in SNS use based on geographical origin, the relationships between acculturation skills, digital linguistic learning, and levels of intercultural adaptation, as well as the predictive capacity of active and informational digital practices. The results indicate that SNSs primarily facilitate the maintenance of cultural identity and connections with the country of origin, while their contribution to participation in the host culture is more limited. Although no significant differences were found in students' overall digital skills or adaptation scores, positive correlations emerged between intercultural adaptation and practices such as digital content updates and participation in cultural content. These data suggest that the inclusive potential of SNSs is linked to mindful use: intentional interactions oriented toward cultural exchange can transform these platforms into spaces for linguistic learning, social connection, and the construction of intercultural capital. This highlights the need for educational interventions to

promote a critical and interculturally-oriented use of digital media.

Keywords: Social network sites, Intercultural adaptation, Migrant adolescents, Digital practices, Inclusive education

1. Introduction

The demographic landscape in Italy is characterized by a growing presence of young people with non-Italian citizenship, a phenomenon particularly pronounced in the North-East region, and specifically in Veneto. Among residents aged 11 to 19, nearly 9.7% are foreign-born, with a significant proportion born abroad and arriving in Italy at different stages of development: 11.7% before age 6, 17% between 6 and 10 years, and 11.8% at age 11 or older. In Veneto, the percentage of foreign minors reaches 14.8%, exceeding the national average of 11.8%, with 96,105 non-Italian students enrolled during the 2021/2022 school year, of whom approximately 28,735 were born abroad (Veneto, F. M. R., & del Veneto, G. R., 2025). These data reflect a complex and multifaceted migratory phenomenon that poses multiple challenges regarding adaptation and integration, particularly within the educational context.

The migration experience represents a profound change for these young individuals, often accompanied by emotional difficulties such as nostalgia, isolation, and anxiety (Lai & Cai, 2023). Among the primary challenges are linguistic and cultural barriers, adaptation to the new social context, and the delicate identity negotiation that ensues (Kutscher & Kreß, 2018). Although these experiences are subjective and variable, the literature highlights social ties as fundamental protective factors for successful intercultural adaptation, fostering the development of a sense of belonging in the new country (Ward & Kennedy, 1999; Bierwiazzonek & Kunst, 2021). However, traditional acculturation models have predominantly focused on the relationship between heritage and host cultures, often underestimating the complexity of the multinational and multicultural social networks in which migrant adolescents are embedded (Bierwiazzonek & Kunst, 2021).

Adding to this complexity is today's digital dimension, which permeates the ways in which migrant adolescents relate to others and construct their identities. Digital environments and Social Network Site (SNSs) serve as key tools not only for maintaining transnational ties but also for accessing cultural, educational, and employment-related information about the host country. They play a central role in socialization within the host society: through SNSs, migrant adolescents can build new relational networks, connect with local peers and diverse communities, explore local customs and traditions, and experience forms of social inclusion that integrate both online and offline dimensions (Zanfrini & Pasini, 2025). This dual function—as a bridge to their culture of origin and as an active instrument for social integration—highlights the significance of digital technologies in contemporary integration processes.

Most studies to date have focused on adult or young adult migrants, documenting how social media use addresses affective, identity-related, informational, and psychological well-being needs, with variations influenced by cultural and socio-economic factors (Akter et al., 2024; Mancini et al., 2019). Less attention has been given to migrant adolescents, despite this age

group representing a critical period for processes of acculturation, linguistic inclusion, and identity development.

This lack of research highlights the urgent need to deepen the understanding of the role SNSs play in either facilitating or hindering intercultural, linguistic, and social adaptation during adolescence, especially within the Italian context. It is therefore essential to develop educational strategies that integrate the digital dimension, promoting critical and informed competencies to support the positive socio-cultural and linguistic inclusion of migrant adolescents.

In this perspective, the project "*Vie di uscita: storie di scatti e di vita*" is situated, developed within the Excellence Project of the Department of Comparative Linguistic and Cultural Studies at Ca' Foscari University of Venice (2023–2027). The project aims to explore, in an exploratory manner, the influence of SNSs on the acculturation processes and sociocultural and linguistic adaptation of migrant adolescents attending the Provincial Adult Education Centers (CPIA) in the North-East of Italy. The sample comprises 35 students primarily from Eastern Europe (Albania, Kosovo, Moldova, Ukraine) and Africa (Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Gambia, Guinea, Senegal), allowing for the investigation of differences related to diverse cultural, linguistic, and technological backgrounds of origin.

The primary research questions guiding this study are: do acculturation practices through SNSs differ among migrant adolescents from distinct geographical origins (Africa vs. Eastern Europe)? What is the relationship between acculturation practices via SNSs and levels of intercultural adaptation among migrant adolescents? To what extent do acculturation practices on SNSs predict intercultural adaptation?

By employing statistical analyses including t-tests, Pearson correlations, and simple linear regression, the research aims to provide evidence useful for defining targeted educational practices designed to promote school and social inclusion, the development of functional socio-cultural and linguistic competencies, and conscious participation in the digital environment. In this way, social media can be leveraged as powerful tools for building solid and inclusive relational networks, facilitating active and informed participation in the social life of the host country, and fostering educational interventions that are up-to-date and aligned with the experiential realities of migrant adolescents.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Adaptation and Acculturation

The literature on intercultural adaptation acknowledges Berry (1997) as one of the seminal contributors, conceptualizing acculturation as a set of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral changes influenced by interactions with the new cultural context. The four strategies identified—integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization—stem from the combination of maintaining ties to the heritage culture and participating in the host society. Within this framework, Searle and Ward (1990) distinguish two complementary levels of adaptation: psychological adaptation, related to subjective well-being, and sociocultural adaptation, which concerns the ability to effectively manage everyday situations and social

relationships.

To measure these dimensions, various instruments have been proposed. The Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS; Furnham & Bochner, 1982) and its revisions (Ward & Kennedy, 1999) focus on the competencies required to navigate social and institutional contexts, while the Brief Acculturation Orientation Scale (BAOS; Demes & Geeraert, 2014) examines orientations toward both heritage and host cultures, highlighting how openness to the latter facilitates integration.

In the present study, however, the focus extends beyond cultural orientation to intercultural sensitivity conceived as a developmental process. For this reason, the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale Questionnaire (ICSSQ; Kuusisto et al., 2015) was selected. This instrument is based on Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, which describes a continuum from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism. Unlike other measures, the ICSSQ allows for the assessment of how individuals interpret and value cultural differences—a crucial aspect when investigating migrant adolescents in educational settings, especially when aiming to analyse the role of social networks as facilitators of conscious intercultural openness.

2.2 Migrant Adolescents and Adaptation Processes Through SNS

In recent years, the expansion of social media among migrant populations has fostered the convergence of migration studies and digital media research, giving rise to the interdisciplinary field of "digital migration studies" (Mancini et al., 2019). This area examines the impact of social media throughout the entire migration journey, from arrival to social inclusion. However, theoretical reflection in Europe remains fragmented, often focusing on emergency contexts rather than long-term integration processes.

Specifically, the role of SNSs in the lives of migrant adolescents remains underexplored, despite this group being vulnerable and strategically important for understanding the dynamics of cultural adaptation. Mancini et al. (2019) and Akter et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of such studies for designing educational interventions that critically integrate digital social media into pathways of reception and social participation.

Numerous studies indicate that SNSs can support adaptation by facilitating access to practical information, professional networks, and spaces for identity negotiation (Veronis et al., 2018). Tudsri and Hebbani (2015), studying young Hazara refugees in Australia, show how platform use varies according to language proficiency, potentially fostering both integration and the maintenance of cultural ties to the country of origin. However, the latter is constrained by factors such as costs and the digital divide.

SNSs also provide spaces perceived as safe, where migrants can learn the language and observe the social norms of the host country prior to face-to-face interactions (An et al., 2020; Ihejirika & Krtalic, 2021). Regular participation in online activities motivates language learning by enhancing the experience (Lai & Tai, 2021), while the cognitive and informational use of SNS helps overcome geographic and cultural barriers, thereby strengthening intercultural knowledge (Mohd Yusuf et al., 2021).

Relationally, active use of social media enhances perceived social support from both origin and host communities, positively impacting psychological and behavioural adaptation (Mohd Yusuf et al., 2021; Pang, 2020). However, the absence of positive feedback in the local environment can lead to exclusion and alienation (Rehman & Wu, 2020; Udwan et al., 2020).

The use of social media evolves throughout the various phases of migration: as adaptation increases, dependence on online ethnic contacts decreases, although during the stabilization phase virtual relationships with the country of origin remain frequent (Yau et al., 2019; Fujs & Vrhovec, 2020). The effects of ethnic communication are ambivalent: overly strong ties may limit intercultural openness (Bucholtz, 2019), but they can also promote integration and well-being (Ju et al., 2021).

Unaccompanied minors in Germany use social networks to develop language skills, maintain relationships, and cope with challenges encountered during their journey (Kutscher & Kreß, 2018). Despite infrastructural limitations, social media remain fundamental for communication and inclusion (Alam & Imran, 2015; Bacishoga et al., 2016). However, excessive or dependent use can weaken real-life contacts and hinder the formation of robust social networks (Alencar & Tsagkroni, 2019; Ju et al., 2023). Conditions such as long working hours or introversion may lead to isolation within homogeneous online groups, thereby reducing contact with the local society (Valsdóttir & Lubbers, 2023).

The effectiveness of SNSs depends on individual and contextual variables such as gender, age, education, occupation, and length of stay (Du & Lin, 2019). Ethnic cultural, linguistic, and social capital influence access to new networks (Bucholtz, 2019). Young adults tend to use more local platforms and integrate into the new context, with SNSs potentially alleviating stress and stigma by providing emotional support (Takhar et al., 2023; An et al., 2020).

Despite the increasing number of studies, literature has primarily focused on adult and young adult migrants, while migrant adolescents remain underexplored. This age group is crucial for understanding how acculturation processes unfold in the digital era.

The present contribution aims to begin addressing this gap by analysing SNSs use, digital skills, acculturation, and Italian language learning within the adaptation pathways of migrant adolescents in Italy. The objective is to provide actionable recommendations for inclusive educational practices that respond to the needs of new generations in multicultural school contexts, while leveraging the educational potential of digital media without overlooking its critical challenges.

3. Methods and Instruments

Data collection, initiated in 2024, was based on two main instruments selected and adapted to the study's objectives: the *Digital Acculturation Practices Questionnaire for Migrant Adolescents* (DAP-QAM; Banzato, 2025) and the *Intercultural Sensitivity Scale Questionnaire* (ICSSQ; Kuusisto et al., 2015), grounded in the *Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity* (DMIS; Bennett, 1993). Both instruments employ a six-point Likert scale, capable of capturing more nuanced variations compared to narrower scales.

The DAP-QAM was designed to thoroughly explore the digital acculturation practices of migrant adolescents, structured into three domains: digital skills, digital acculturation, and language learning through digital tools. The item development followed a rigorous methodological process: a systematic literature review on digital acculturation and digital media literacy, identification of key domains, iterative validation by an interdisciplinary panel of experts who assessed relevance, clarity, and cultural appropriateness, and a pilot phase involving eight migrant adolescents similar to the final sample to test item comprehensibility, relevance, and consistency.

The first section of the DAP-QAM, consisting of 16 items, evaluates digital skills specifically related to activities carried out through Social Network Sites (SNSs), divided into three subcategories:

- *Social skills*: the ability to effectively interact via SNSs with both Italian acquaintances and fellow nationals, emphasizing the relational aspect of digital media literacy.
- *Updating skills*: the habitual use of SNSs to seek and consume information about news, music, fashion, and other content, drawing from both the Italian context and the country of origin.
- *Digital production skills*: competencies and behaviours related to content creation on SNSs, including posting, sharing multimedia materials, and actively participating in discussions or live video sessions.

The second section, comprising 7 items, investigates digital acculturation practices mediated by SNSs, focusing on three dimensions:

- *Passive acculturation*: following Italian cultural events and traditions online without direct participation.
- *Active acculturation*: engaging personally in cultural practices via SNSs, such as learning to cook traditional Italian dishes through digital tutorials.
- *Cultural socialization*: exploring new places, interacting with Italian communities or other migrant peers on SNSs, and sharing posts connected to both the country of origin and the host society.

The third section, consisting of 13 items, analyses Italian language learning facilitated through social networks and digital tools, structured into four subdimensions:

- *Receptive dimension*: exposure via SNSs to multimedia educational materials produced by Italian language teachers.
- *Linguistic production*: active use of Italian language in SNS posts and chats.
- *Linguistic engagement*: communicative interactions with Italian or foreign peers mediated by SNSs.
- *Self-assessment*: awareness and reflection on one's own grammar and pronunciation

skills in digital communication.

- *Use of auxiliary tools:* use of automatic translators to understand and produce written texts.

This structure allows for a detailed understanding of the influence of SNSs in intercultural integration processes, providing data on the communicative, social, cultural, and linguistic dynamics of young migrants.

To measure intercultural adaptation, the *Intercultural Sensitivity Scale Questionnaire* (ICSSQ) was employed. This instrument consists of 23 items assessing perception, understanding, and response to cultural differences. The questionnaire conceptualizes intercultural development as a continuum ranging from an ethnocentric orientation (viewing one's own culture as the primary frame of reference) to an ethnorelative orientation (the ability to critically and consciously appreciate and value diversity). Originally developed in English and designed for individuals aged 12 to 16, the ICSSQ has been translated and adapted to the Italian context, preserving its validity and reliability.

The combined use of the DAP-QAM and ICSSQ aims to develop a multidimensional analysis by integrating the study of digital practices with the assessment of intercultural sensitivity. This approach offers an innovative contribution to understanding the adaptation processes of migrant adolescents, enabling the identification not only of the technical and linguistic skills they develop but also of the attitudes and strategies with which young people engage cultural diversity.

4. Results

4.1 Participants and Use of SNSs

The final sample consisted of 35 newly arrived migrant adolescents (age range 15–21 years, $M = 17.1$; $SD = 1.4$), selected from an initial pool of 61 after excluding incomplete questionnaires. The majority were male ($n = 28$; 80%), with predominant origins from Eastern Europe ($n = 17$; 48.6%) and Africa ($n = 18$; 51.4%). The length of stay in Italy ranged from 2 to 99 months ($M = 17.3$), with 70% present for less than two years. Most participants resided in reception communities (68.6%), followed by those living with parents (25.7%) or relatives (5.7%). Regarding schooling in the country of origin, 74.3% had attended school for 5–8 years, 17.1% for less than 5 or more than 9 years; one participant did not respond. Italian language proficiency was generally good in reading comprehension, moderate to good in oral pronunciation, and sufficient for informal conversations; written production was mainly supported by dictionaries or translators. During questionnaire administration, both the researcher and the teacher provided assistance to clarify instructions and resolve any comprehension difficulties.

On average, adolescents use 4.7 SNSs. The most popular are Instagram (82.9%), YouTube (80%), TikTok (74.3%), and WhatsApp (74.3%), followed by Facebook (48.6%), Snapchat (31.4%), and Twitter (5.7%). Age-related analysis shows that 15–16-year-olds primarily use YouTube ($M = 5.2$) and TikTok ($M = 5.0$); 17-year-olds predominantly use Instagram ($M =$

5.1) and TikTok ($M = 4.4$); among 18–21-year-olds, the use of Facebook ($M = 4.0$) and WhatsApp ($M = 5.7$) increases.

The average daily usage time is 4.5 hours: 51.4% spend 2–5 hours per day on social media, 28.6% more than 5 hours, and 20% between 1–2 hours. Prolonged use (over 5 hours) is more common among 15–16-year-olds (33.3%) and 17-year-olds (31.6%), whereas 18–21-year-olds tend to engage moderately (2–3 hours, 60%).

4.2 Reliability and Normality

The reliability of the DAP-QAM questionnaire (36 items) was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, resulting in a generally high value ($\alpha = 0.811$), confirming good internal consistency. The three questionnaire dimensions demonstrated acceptable reliability levels: digital skills ($\alpha = 0.736$), digital acculturation ($\alpha = 0.647$), and digital language learning ($\alpha = 0.815$).

Given the small sample size (< 50), the Shapiro-Wilk test was employed to verify the normality of score distributions. Results indicate a normal distribution for the overall score ($p = 0.695$; Eastern Europe = 0.921; Africa = 0.674) as well as for the individual dimensions: digital skills ($p = 0.695$), digital acculturation ($p = 0.618$), and digital language learning ($p = 0.778$). Normality was further supported by graphical analysis (Figures 1).

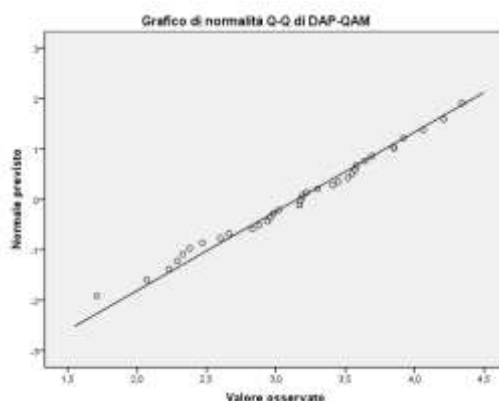


Figure 1. Q-Q graph supporting the normality of the distribution of DAP-QAM

The Intercultural Sensitivity Scale Questionnaire (ICSSQ; Kuusisto et al., 2015) demonstrated good internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.823$). The score distribution was found to be normal, as indicated by the Shapiro-Wilk test ($p = 0.598$; Eastern Europe = 0.301; Africa = 0.890), with means of 3.51 and 3.19, respectively.

4.3 T-Test: DAP-QAM Based on Geographic Origin

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to analyse the overall results of the DAP-QAM questionnaire and its individual categories (digital skills, digital acculturation, digital language learning), comparing digital, cultural, and linguistic practices between migrant students from Africa and Eastern Europe.

The overall DAP-QAM score did not differ significantly between the group of students from Africa ($M = 3.28$; $SD = 0.59$) and the Eastern European group ($M = 3.02$; $SD = 0.67$), $t(31.77) = -1.215$; $p = 0.233$; 95% CI $[-0.697, 0.176]$. This indicates that, within this sample, no statistically significant differences emerged in digital acculturation practices measured by the questionnaire between the two groups analyzed.

The t-test results for the first section of the questionnaire, which measures digital skills, indicate that the overall score is significantly higher among students from Africa ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 0.76$) compared to those from Eastern Europe ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 0.62$), $t(32.4) = -2.344$, $p = 0.025$, 95% CI $[-1.02, -0.07]$. In the social subdimension, no significant differences were observed between the two groups: Africa ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.78$) vs. Eastern Europe ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 0.82$), $t(32.5) = -1.069$, $p = 0.293$. In the digital updating subdimension, African students scored significantly higher ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 0.95$) than those from Eastern Europe ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 0.86$), $t(33) = -2.467$, $p = 0.019$, 95% CI $[-1.38, -0.13]$. Finally, in the digital production subdimension, no statistically significant differences were found: Africa ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 1.36$) vs. Eastern Europe ($M = 2.14$, $SD = 0.97$), $t(30.7) = -1.52$, $p = 0.139$.

The items related to digital acculturation do not show significant overall differences between students from Eastern Europe and Africa (Eastern Europe $M = 3.16$, $SD = 1.10$; Africa $M = 2.88$, $SD = 0.90$), $t(31.0) = 0.826$, $p = 0.415$. Similarly, no significant differences were found in the subdimensions: passive acculturation (Eastern Europe $M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.15$; Africa $M = 2.70$, $SD = 1.12$), $t(32.7) = -0.091$, $p = 0.928$; active acculturation (Eastern Europe $M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.66$; Africa $M = 3.31$, $SD = 1.37$), $t(31.1) = 0.319$, $p = 0.752$; and cultural socialization (Eastern Europe $M = 3.53$, $SD = 1.48$; Africa $M = 2.64$, $SD = 1.39$), $t(32.5) = 1.465$, $p = 0.153$.

The items concerning digital language learning also do not show significant overall differences between the group of students from Eastern Europe and that of African students, $t(32.1) = -1.569$, $p = 0.127$. No significant differences were observed in the subdimensions of linguistic engagement ($t(32.9) = -1.268$, $p = 0.214$), use of digital tools ($t(32.8) = -1.037$, $p = 0.307$), linguistic production ($t(32.9) = -0.995$, $p = 0.327$), receptive learning ($t(32.2) = -1.213$, $p = 0.234$), and self-assessment ($t(31.7) = -1.508$, $p = 0.142$).

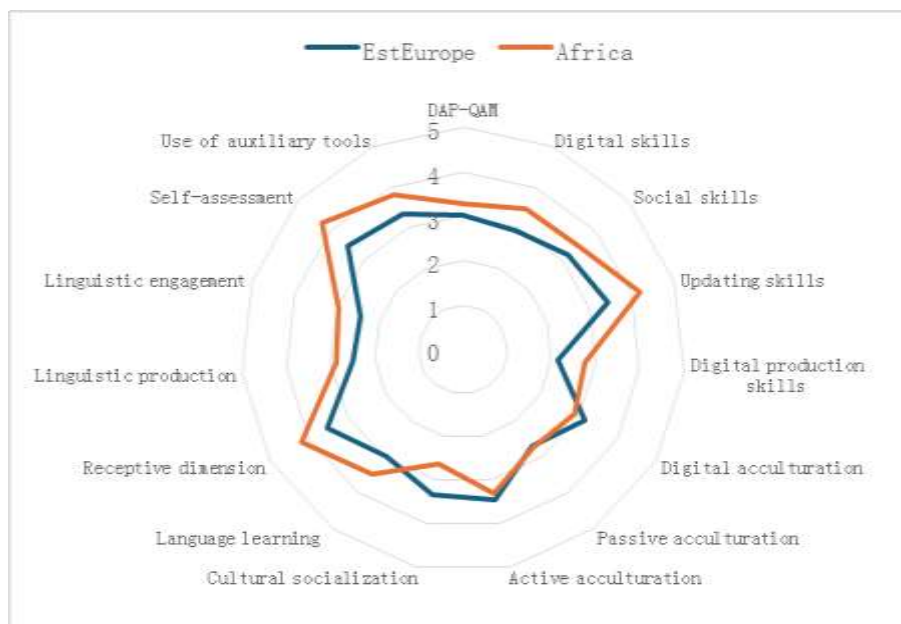


Figure 2. Comparison of mean scores between African and Eastern European students - DAP-QAM

4.4 Correlation Between ICSSQ and DAP-QAM

A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated to examine the relationships between the total digital acculturation practices (DAP-QAM) scores and intercultural adaptation levels measured by the ICSSQ total score. No significant correlation was found between the overall DAP-QAM score and intercultural adaptation (ICSSQ) ($r(33) = .172$, $p = .323$), suggesting that general digital acculturation practices are not directly associated with adaptation in this sample.

When examining subcategories, a significant positive correlation emerged between the digital updating skills and intercultural adaptation ($r(33) = .377$, $p = .025$), indicating that adolescents who actively use SNSs for informational purposes tend to show higher levels of intercultural adaptation. Furthermore, participation in active acculturation showed a strong positive correlation with intercultural adaptation ($r(33) = .524$, $p = .001$), demonstrating that greater engagement with cultural content online is associated with better adaptation outcomes.

Conversely, no significant correlations were found between intercultural adaptation and digital content production ($r(33) = -.222$, $p = .199$) or linguistic digital learning dimensions (all $p > .2$), suggesting these factors are less directly related to intercultural sensitivity in this sample.

4.5 Regression Modeling the Impact of DAP-QAM on ICSSQ

Simple linear regression analysis was employed to examine the extent to which various dimensions of digital skills, digital acculturation, and digital language learning could predict

the total score of intercultural adaptation - ICSSQ - (dependent variable). The overall model was significant ($F(12,22) = 3.661$, $p = 0.004$), explaining 66.6% of the variance in the dependent variable ($R^2 = 0.666$).

Among the predictors considered, two variables showed a positive and significant effect on the level of intercultural adaptation: updating skills ($\beta = 0.304$, $p = 0.046$) and active acculturation ($\beta = 0.475$, $p = 0.010$). These results indicate that greater engagement in information updating and active participation in cultural content through SNSs is associated with better intercultural adaptation.

The remaining variables, including digital production, language production skills, language self-assessment, and other social and cultural digital components, did not reach statistical significance in the model.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the digital acculturation practices of newly arrived migrant adolescents and their relationship with intercultural adaptation, allowing us to address the research questions posed. Regarding the first question, which examined differences across geographical groups, the results reveal both shared patterns and notable divergences across the social, cultural, and linguistic dimensions. At the social level, both groups maintain strong ties with peers from their country of origin, consistent with the literature on transnational networks and their role in sustaining identity and emotional continuity (Mancini et al., 2019; Akter et al., 2024). The high scores related to communication with friends from the same background (Africa: 4.47; Eastern Europe: 4.05) further underscore the centrality of social media as spaces of emotional and social continuity. However, adolescents from Eastern Europe display greater openness toward the host context, as indicated by higher mean scores in interactions with Italian peers (3.72 compared to 2.94 among African adolescents) and in seeking new local friendships (3.33 vs. 2.53), suggesting a stronger inclination toward relational exploration.

From a recreational perspective, both groups tend to favor content related to their heritage culture, particularly music and fashion, as shown by the very high scores for musical updating (5.61 among African adolescents; 4.82 among those from Eastern Europe). Nevertheless, the Eastern European group demonstrates greater curiosity toward the Italian sociocultural context, engaging more frequently with Italian news (3.50 vs. 2.65) and fashion trends (3.77 vs. 2.47). This orientation is reflected in the mean scores for digital acculturation (3.16 compared to 2.88), with a more pronounced advantage in cultural socialization (3.35 vs. 2.64), suggesting a more active exploration of Italian places, practices, and cultural references. In both groups, however, digital production remains limited: the platforms are used primarily for consumption rather than creation, indicating a still marginal engagement with the expressive and discursive dynamics typical of digital environments.

The linguistic dimension emerges as the most critical aspect of digital acculturation processes, in relation to both the first and second research questions. Although African adolescents report slightly higher scores in digital language learning (3.47 compared to 2.96), language

competence as mediated through social media remains generally underdeveloped in both groups. Subdimension analyses reveal a marked predominance of receptive exposure (4.19 for African adolescents; 3.53 for those from Eastern Europe) over productive, interactive, and metalinguistic practices, all of which register low levels. Italian thus appears in adolescents' digital environments primarily as content to be consumed—videos, posts, reels—rather than as a resource for communicative participation. Interaction with Italian-speaking peers, the production of original content in Italian, the intentional use of digital linguistic tools, and metalinguistic reflection are all marginal.

This configuration contrasts sharply with studies on young adult and adult migrants, who tend to use social media as spaces to familiarize themselves with the host-country language, experiment with pragmatic norms, broaden their communicative repertoires, and prepare for offline interactions (An et al., 2020; Ihejirika & Krtalic, 2021; Lai & Tai, 2021; Mancini et al., 2019; Akter et al., 2024). Among adolescents, by contrast, SNSs appear to function primarily as intra-group identity and relational spaces, shaped by monoethnic networks and exchanges in the mother tongue, with Italian assuming a passive and instrumental role, lacking strategic purpose. One possible explanation lies in the limited awareness of existing free digital linguistic resources—didactic channels, learner communities, online tutors—and in the absence of conceptual tools or role models within family or peer networks that might encourage their integration into communicative and acculturative trajectories. This lack of orientation reinforces a use of social media confined to entertainment and intra-community sociality, hindering the transformation of digital environments into linguistic and intercultural resources.

The weakness of the linguistic dimension can be further interpreted in light of second language acquisition theories. The evidence collected aligns with Krashen's hypothesis (1981), according to which passive exposure to input, when not accompanied by opportunities for meaningful participation, is insufficient to generate substantial progress in L2. Similarly, Long's (1996) interactionist approaches and Swain's (1985) Output Hypothesis emphasize that language learning requires opportunities for meaning negotiation and linguistic production—conditions that are largely absent in adolescents' digital environments. From a sociolinguistic perspective, the findings resonate with Blommaert's (2010) framework on migrant repertoires, which posits that interactions within monoethnic digital communities tend to reinforce the use of the heritage language, thereby limiting access to plurilingual practices and, in particular, to the emergence of translanguaging spaces (García & Wei, 2014). The absence of these conditions—meaningful interaction, linguistic output, and heterogeneous digital environments—suggests interpretative hypotheses that may help explain why Italian remains marginal in the digital practices of migrant adolescents and why the linguistic dimensions measured in this study are not associated with levels of intercultural adaptation.

The correlation and regression analyses, addressing the second and third research questions, confirm that it is not the quantity of social media use that supports intercultural adaptation, but rather the quality of the practices enacted. The overall DAP-QAM score does not correlate significantly with the ICSSQ, indicating that more frequent use does not necessarily

lead to greater adaptation. Two subdimensions, however, emerge as central: updating skills ($r = .377$, $p = .025$) and active acculturation ($r = .524$, $p = .001$). Adolescents in this sample who use social media to obtain information about the Italian context and who actively engage with cultural content from the host society display higher levels of intercultural sensitivity. The regression model reinforces this pattern, with updating skills ($\beta = 0.304$, $p = .046$) and active acculturation ($\beta = 0.475$, $p = .010$) emerging as significant predictors. Given the cross-sectional and non-experimental design of the study, these findings should be interpreted as associations rather than evidence of causal relationships: the observed links reflect emerging tendencies and do not allow for deterministic inferences between digital practices and intercultural adaptation.

Conversely, neither digital production nor the dimensions of language learning mediated by social media show significant associations with adaptation. It is likely that such activities remain confined within homogeneous ethnic networks, a phenomenon already noted in studies demonstrating how intra-group communication can strengthen a sense of belonging while limiting intercultural openness and access to new networks (Ju et al., 2021; Bucholtz, 2019; Alencar & Tsagkroni, 2019; Ju et al., 2023). The algorithmic architecture of social platforms further reinforces these dynamics by creating filter bubbles and cultural silos that reduce exposure to diverse linguistic and cultural perspectives (Gillespie, 2018; Pariser, 2011). In the absence of active linguistic engagement, these conditions may intensify the risk of digital self-segregation: while adolescents experience identity continuity and emotional protection, they struggle to access opportunities for linguistic and intercultural expansion.

Overall, the findings suggest that integration through social networks requires digital practices that are intentional, interactive, and critically informed, as well as culturally and linguistically oriented. Informational use and active acculturation emerge as key factors in the development of intercultural competence, whereas the linguistic dimension remains the most fragile yet most essential area to strengthen. There is therefore an urgent need to promote educational interventions that go beyond technical digital literacy and explicitly incorporate cultural and, above all, linguistic digital literacy. Schools, CPIAs and both formal and non-formal educational settings can play a decisive role in supporting migrant adolescents in developing a more conscious and strategic use of social media, enhancing opportunities for exposure to and production of Italian, fostering participation in mixed digital communities, and encouraging critical reflection on their online practices.

6. Educational Implications and Conclusions

Social networks are complex environments that, in addition to supporting identity and relational needs, can offer meaningful opportunities for cultural exploration and linguistic development. However, the findings show that such potential remains largely unactivated among migrant adolescents, particularly in the absence of educational guidance that helps them interpret and critically engage with the logics of digital media. The linguistic dimension is especially fragile: Italian is used almost exclusively in receptive ways, and the limited familiarity with online linguistic resources indicates a lack of metacognitive and socio-cognitive strategies necessary to transform digital environments into spaces for learning

and intercultural participation. As a hypothesis to be explored further, this may also reflect the possible absence of proximal models—adults in the family or more experienced peers—who could model critical and strategic uses of social media. Unlike the young adults described in previous studies (e.g., Mancini et al., 2019; Akter et al., 2024), who often leverage social media to navigate the host context and prepare for offline interactions, the adolescents in this study appear to lack figures who exemplify such practices. This absence contributes to a more passive and constrained use of social networks, further limiting the possibilities for developing linguistic and intercultural competencies through digital engagement.

Despite the caution required by the cross-sectional design and the small sample size, the study highlights the need to broaden the scope of media education for migrant adolescents. Current educational programs at schools, which focus primarily on managing digital risks, are insufficient to acknowledge the needs and resources of plurilingual youth and leave unexplored the potential of social networks as environments for linguistic and cultural development (Bruinenberg et al., 2021). This opens promising avenues for context-sensitive educational practices that foster active participation, linguistic plurality, and interaction with heterogeneous communicative communities, without necessarily taking the form of large-scale policy interventions.

Looking ahead, the exploration of translanguaging practices on social media could offer a valuable contribution to understanding how migrant youth integrate their linguistic resources in digital contexts and to identifying the conditions that enable more generative uses of the L2. Longitudinal studies, mixed-method approaches, and analyses of online interactions may clarify how such practices evolve over time and how they are influenced by family, school, and relational factors.

Overall, promoting an intentional, critical, and culturally oriented use of social networks appears to be a promising pathway for supporting sociocultural and linguistic inclusion processes. Helping adolescents to recognize and navigate the logics that structure digital environments does not simply mean protecting them from risks; it means equipping them with tools to become aware users and active agents in their own trajectories of growth, acculturation, and social participation.

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Note

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