



Exploring the Relationships between Gender Differences and Digital Media Use: A Systematic Literature Review

Felicia Ceausu 

Gheorghe Zane” Institute, Romanian Academy Iași Branch, Psychology and Educational Science Department

Abstract: A systematic, qualitative literature review was performed to determine the extent and scope of scientific, peer reviewed literature on gender differences and digital media use among adolescents. The research design consisted on four steps: (1) searching and identifying relevant literature; (2) reading of abstracts; (3) analysing and categorising of full papers; and (4) synthesising the findings. This review was conducted according to the articles preferred for systematic reviews and meta-analyses (PRISMA) (Page et al., 2021). The data were retrieved in April 2026 with the boolean search „and”. In this review, I included primary empirical studies investigating gender differences on digital media use. I used the following keywords (or a combination of keywords) in searching articles published between 2015 and 2025: digital media use, gender differences, adolescents. My eligibility criteria for inclusion were: a) primary empirical studies published in peer-reviewed journals in English with full texts available; b) publication period between 2015 and 2025; c) focused on gender differences on media digital use among adolescents. Therefore, the following records were excluded from our review a) conference abstracts, book chapters, commentaries, editorials, academic letters, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and literature reviews. According to the results, there are gender differences in digital media use meaning that more male adolescents than female adolescents are using the digital media technology. Conclusions: To date, more male than female adolescents use digital media in different contexts so that a computer literacy among females should be studied more carefully.

Keywords: gender differences, digital media use, adolescents

INTRODUCTION

According to Sharma et al. (2024), Goldberg was the author who introduced the idea of Problematic Internet Use (PIU), or Internet addiction, in 1995. This idea sustains also the issue of pathological Internet use, net addiction, online addiction, Internet addiction disorder, and cyber disorder. Beard and Wolf (2001) as cited in Sharma et al. (2024) stated that PIU may lead to difficulties not only in one’s personal life, but also in professionals and social life. Moreno et al. (2013) described PIU as excessive internet use resulting in social, academic, professional, psychological and occupational challenges.

Furthermore, Young in 1998 stated that internet addictions is „any online-related, compulsive behaviour that interferes with normal living and causes severe stress on family, friends, loved ones, and one’s work environment.”

Sharma et al. (2024) observed that problematic internet use is on the rise among teenagers and this aspect can be related to many adverse mental and physical health conditions. According to the above mentioned authored (Sharma et al., 2024), Internet addiction can be regarded as a new psychiatric disease and is characterized by withdrawal

symptoms such as anxiety, tolerance, and an increased time spent on the internet or other sophisticated technology without disclosing the time spent using them.

An article published by the American Psychological Association and accessed in May 2026 described adolescence as the period in human development that begins between 10-12 years and ends when a person reaches physiological maturity (between 19-20 years old). Thus, during this period there are prominent changes that are seen in physical appearance, sexual characteristics and interests. All these changes affects the body image, the self-concept and self-esteem of this population. Adolescents emphasise social acceptance and seek autonomy and independence from their parents. Casey et al. (2008) stated that adolescence is associated with a period belonging to increased risk-taking behaviors and a spurt in emotional reactivity thus the importance of analyzing the relationships existing between internet, digital media and technology and gender differences in adolescents is salient. Furthermore, Taywade and Khubalkar (2019) and Sama in 2020 noticed that in the past two decades, accessibility to technology has drastically evolved and the credit for this goes to revolution in digital development. Digital media, in general, and computers, in special, started becoming more available in smaller and and in more compact devices, with increased advanced features irrespective of smaller size of the devices. According to them, today the most popular of such devices is smartphone. Moreover, Livingstone and Helsper (2008, as cited in Yildiz & Varsak, 2024) evidenced that digital media devices became one of the main tools shaping individuals' daily lives, learning processes and social interactions. This tendency was even more salient in children and young people who interact more with technological devise from early ages, using them for learning, entertainment and socialization.

These days, smartphones have replaced other types of screen devices and this this way Taywade and Khulbaka in 2029 and Sama in 2019 observed that even when people are watching TV or using their laptop, they are regularly checking their smartphones in the same time. Moreover, according to the same previous cited researchers, people tend to use smartphones aş helpers for different types of activities such as making friends, dating, finding a route, getting answers to different questions, clicking on photos, sharing pictures with others or even making video calls. Thus, this literature review brings values to the scientific field not only because it takes into account only the empirical articles published between the last decade but also because it could be a start point for future Romanian researchers to do empirical researches on this topic or even more meta-analyses in order to identify some patterns in using digital media on adolescents taking into account their gender.

To date, to my knowledge, there are no Romanian studies that have been published in international journals indexed in databases therefore I haven't included in my literature review such types of field studies held on Romanian population but this theoretical study could be a start point for future researchers to conduct researches interested in gender differences regarding to digital media use.

Existing Relationships between Gender Differences and Digital Media Use

According to Uygurtaş and Akdemir in 2025, generation Z, those born between 1997 and 2012 and constituting the majority of today's university students, is often regarded as the first generation to grow up in a fully digital world.

Thelwall in 2008 stated that gender difference in social media was used to nurture ties with close friends since the early age of social network sites.

Researchers such as Taywade and Khubalkar (2019) and his colleague in 2020 observed that gender differences have always been an important factor whenever any pattern of behavior is studied in social sciences. According to them, the findings showed that this aspect gives a very crucial demographic information, and ultimately helps researchers, educators, and policy makers to understand the issue in more depth. Furthermore, like any other habits, there are significant gender differences in smartphone habits as well.

Since 2019 Taywade and Khubalkar observed that male adolescents than female adolescents are using internet for different purposes and have different preferences for mobile phone/smartphone usage. According to them, male adolescents tend to involve more in problematic use of computers and internet in the past.

Indeed, researchers such as Su et al. (2020) observed that gender differences are evident with regards to use of digital technologies. According to them, previous studies have found that girls tend to use the Internet primarily to access social media platforms and socialize, whereas boys tend to use it more for entertainment purposes, such as playing video games.

Lee and colleagues in 2018 cited by Taywade and Khubalkar (2019) observed that the significant gender differences in digital media's problematic usage are due to biological, psycho-social and sociocultural differences. Furthermore, the use of the internet for gaming, entertainment, shopping, searching for romance and sex related information is done more frequently among males. Lee and colleagues in 2018 (cited in Taywade & Khubalkar, 2019) estimated that internet usage among females is increasing with time, and after a few years, men and women won't show much difference in terms of time spent on the internet.

Taywade and Khubalkar (2019) stated that many researchers (Anshari et al., 2016; Weiser, 2000) say that males spend more time on smartphone than females there through this literature review I will investigate this tendency of male and female of using digital media technology.

Svensson et al. (2022) observed the importance of including gender as a variable is supported by previous research finding social media use to be more strongly associated with well-being for girls than for boys (Twenge & Farley, 2021), whereas some did not find any gender differences (Riehm et al., 2019). These differences in selfie culture be one of the most salient explanation that helps researchers understand when the association between self-presentation and depressive symptoms is larger for girls (Skogen et al., 2021). Moreover, the gender differences observed in the scientific literature indicate that social media use, and different activities of social media may have a larger association with well-being for girls, and that the association between gaming and well-being might be rather similar for boys and girls.

In a study conducted by Totten, Lipscomb, Cook and Lesch in 2005 female participants tend to use more often smartphone for shopping, communication and emergency purpose whereas men use mobiles more frequently for group conferences, new updates, entertainment and office work.

According to Taywade and Khubalkar (2019), there is enough evidence stating that males adolescents and females adolescents have different patterns of internet activities and different preferences for smartphone usage. Bianchi and Philips in 2005 observed in their study that mobile phone usage is gender neutral whereas the majority of recent studies have shown that men tend to involve in more problematic computer use and internet. Indeed, Lee et al. (2018) observed digital media's problematic usage has significant gender differences, these differences are chiefly due to biological, psycho-social and socio-cultural differences.

METHODOLOGY

This review was conducted according to the articles preferred for systematic reviews and meta-analyses (PRISMA) (Page et al., 2021). The data were retrieved in April 2026 with the boolean search „and”.

In this review, I included primary empirical studies investigating gender differences in digital media use. I used the following keywords (or a combination of keywords) in the search from 2015 to 2025: digital media use, gender differences, adolescents.

My eligibility criteria for inclusion were; a) primary empirical studies published in peer-reviewed journals in English with full texts available; b) publication period between 2015 and 2025; c) focused on gender differences on media digital use among adolescents.

Therefore, the following records were excluded from my review a) conference abstracts, book chapters, commentaries, editorials, academic letters, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and literature reviews.

RESULTS

This study aimed at analyzing the scientific literature from the field of digital media use and teenagers population with a focus on gender differences.

My initial hypothesis was that male teenagers are using more social media and digital technologies than female teenagers but the findings of this literature review tend to show that more female adolescents are using social media than male adolescents.

When analyzing the results of the previous table (Table 1. Comparative Studies Table) indeed more female are using social media than male but the their aim in using social media is different. For example, female adolescents are using more social media and digital technology such as smartphones to socialize more with their peers, to promote a positive image in online context whereas male adolescents are using social media and digital technology mainly to play games and for its technical functions.

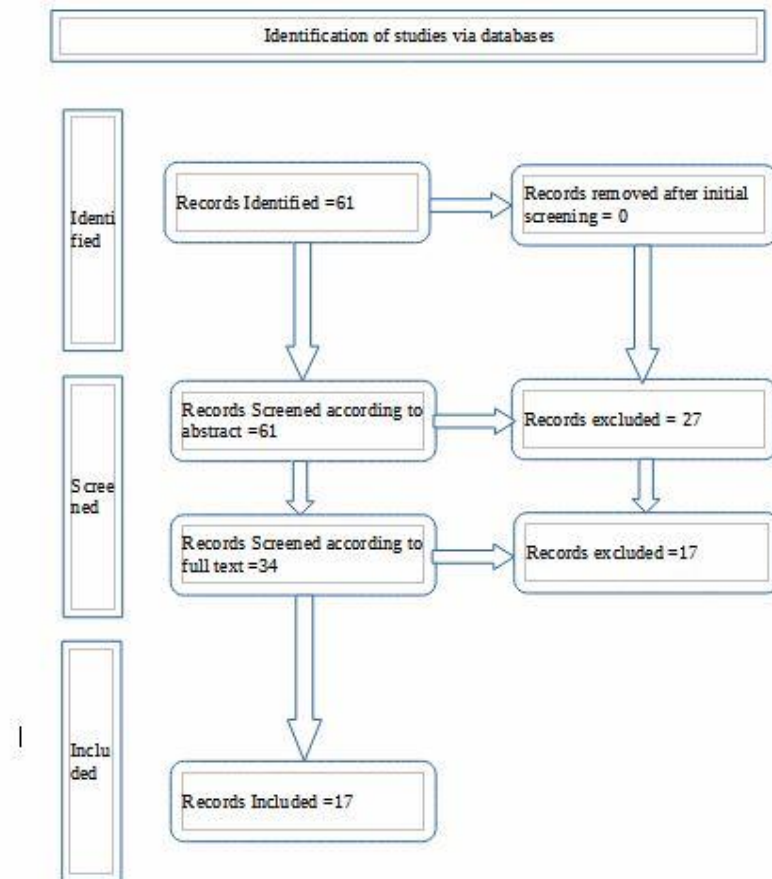


Figure 1. Prisma Diagramme (Page and colab., 2021)

Table 1: Comparative Studies Table

Study	Sample context/ Country	Type of technology analyzed	Results referring to boys	Results referring to girls	Conclusions for the hypothesis
Yildiz & Varsak, 2024	665 students from secondary school Turkey	smartphone, computer, TV, tablet, console	Boys are using more often the computer and the consoles	There are no significant differences between boys and girls regarding the using of smartphone but there is a tendency of girls using more often the smartphone than girls	This study sustains the hypothesis for the usage of computer and gaming.
Niskier et al., 2023	180 adolescents, Brazil	screen use, Problematic Internet Use (PIU), gaming, socialization	The boys have a higher probability to use internet devices to play video games	The girls are using more often the internet in order to socialize with their peers.	This study sustains the hypothesis for active using of internet devices/gaming.
Varchetta et al., 2024	585 young adults, Spain	internet addiction, gaming, social	Male young adults have higher scores at Internet	Female young adults have higher scores at social media addiction	This study sustains the hypothesis for internet addiction and gaming.

		media, phubbing	Addiction (IA) and Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD)	and phone obsession	
Taywade & Khubalkar, 2019	300 Adolescents India	Smartphone usage patterns	The boys are using more often the gaming applications	The girls are using more often the social media network and entertainment applications	This study sustains the functional difference but it is not necessary to a quantitative one.
Sama, 2020	300 adolescents India	smartphone	The boys prefer to play games, to watch videos and to listen to music.	The girls prefer to be on social networks more often and online communication channels.	This study sustains the hypothesis in which boys are using devices for gaming and active technology comparing to girls who are using devices more often for online communication and networking.
Sharma & Singh, 2019	200 adolescents India	smartphone addiction	This study show that boys are more often interested in using devices for technical functions and gaming.	The girls have higher scores for smart addiction than boys.	This study has a mixed outcome showing no significant differences in boys and girls in using devices but there is a tendency of boys in using devices for its technical functions and gaming while the girls for networking.
Gnambs, 2021	13943 adolescents Germany	Information and Communication Technology (ICT) literacy	The boys aged 18 years old tend to have higher scores on using technological devices.	There are no significant differences between boys and girls regarding technological devices at the age of 15 years old.	This study partially sustains the hypothesis referring mainly to digital competency.
Manago et al., 2023	309 adolescents SUA	social media	The boys are using more often the social media for competitive activities.	The girls are using social media more often for emotional bonding, validation and social compensation.	This study sustains the hypothesis referring to the scope for each gender group is using the social media and doesn't make any conclusion on the total time spent on the internet.
İnik et al., 2024	549 students, Turkey	social media addiction and	Without significant differences	Without significant differences	This study doesn't sustain the hypothesis regarding

		appearance anxiety	regarding the gender	regarding the gender	gender differences in social media use.
Booker et al., 2018	9859 adolescents UK	social media interaction	There no significant differences in boys referring to social media use	The girls using social media are manifesting lower levels of well-being.	This study sustains that there are some differences between girls and boys in the way that girls are more affected than boys when using social media.
Cho et al., 2025	4524 adolescents Korea	smartphone usage patterns	The boys are using more smartphone to play games and to watch videos in general.	The girls are using smartphone to communicate more on social media.	This study sustains the hypothesis that boys are using more the smartphone for gaming and watching videos, in general.
Su et al., 2020	technological online community China	Behaviors in tech communities	The boys are offering more information and technical support than girls.	The girls are mainly oriented on relationships and social interaction when using social media.	This study sustains the hypothesis that boys more than girls are offering technical support to their peers.
Garrett, 2022	212 adolescents SUA	digital media & connectedness	The boys manifest a higher level of connection through social media	The girls are having lower scores than boys when it comes to online connection.	This study sustains the hypothesis that there are functional differences among boys and girls.
Twenge & Martin, 2020	221.096 adolescents SUA	Total screen time	The boys are using more frequently the devices for gaming than girls.	The girls have a tendency to use their smartphones to interact on social media.	This study reveals gender differences in using smartphones. Boys are using them for gaming whereas girls are using them for online communication.
Naz et al., 2025	200 students Pakistan	social media engagement	The boys are lower scores at stress than girls.	The girls are using more social media and this implies having a negative impact on them.	This study doesn't sustains the hypothesis that boys are using social media than girl showing the opposite: the girls are using more social media than boys.
Xu et al., 2025	1276 students China	smartphone addiction	The boys are more addicted to gaming than girls.	The girls are having higher scores than boys at emotional distress.	This study sustains the hypothesis that there are gender differences in using smartphones.
Fashami, 2020	10 students Australia	social media usage	The boys are using social media to watch	The girls are using social media to express	This study reveals gender differences in that the boys are

			different informational videos.	themselves more than boys.	using social media to watch informational contents while the girls are using social media to express themselves.
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According to this review, these studies that didn't revealed any significant gender differences among boys and girls in digital media use and digital technology use (mainly smartphones) but these results tend to identify some gender differences in boys and girls preferences for using smartphone, for example, girls tend to use smartphones to socialize more whereas boys tend to use smartphones for gaming (Gnamb, 2021; Inik et al., 2024).

Furthermore, this table evidence that there are significant differences in gender preferences for digital media use (especially smartphone use) in the direction of the hypothesis that more girls than boys are using smartphones, in particular and social media, in general (Booker et al., 2018; Sharma & Singh, 2019; Twenge & Martin, 2020; Naz et al., 2025).

There are also studies that sustain my hypothesis that more boys than girls are using digital media and digital technology (mainly, smartphones) but these differences are shown in their choice of the activities they are displaying while using digital media. Boys are using more digital media than girls with a preference for gaming and general interest for its technical functionalities with a focus on information based on video (Taywade & Khubalkar, 2019; Sama, 2020; Su et al., 2020; Garrett, 2022; Niskier et al., 2023; Varchetta et al., 2024; Yildiz & Varsak, 2024; Cho et al., 2025).

DISCUSSIONS

The analyzed literature shows that gender differences in technology use is mainly referring to functional use and not to quantitative differences. Boys doesn't use more often the technology in terms of total time spent on the internet but they are more involved in digital activities, technical activities, and competitive and ludic activities. The girls are using the technology having in mind goals to socialize and to be more expressive in online communication. Thus, the hypothesis that boys are using more often the digital technologies is sustained only if the usage is defined through activities such as gaming, computer utilization, digital exploration and active technology implications.

The findings of the present literature review is congruent to the results evidenced by Taywade and Khubalkar (2019) in which they showed that use of internet for all forms of interpersonal communication and information gathering is done more by females as compared to males. According to them, females are more active users of social networking sites, entertainment applications, and security functions of smartphones than males. In their turn, males are more active users of gaming applications and online shopping applications from smartphones than females.

According to the above mentioned authors, in the Indian culture, the use of social networking sites by female participants to talk about their issues and express their hostility is a result of many years of suppression and treatment as a secondary gender thus indicating the intensity with which, they are demanding for a change.

Indeed, suppression of any group of society inhibits them from using various opportunities for self-growth, and in turn, results into wastage of a huge amount of talent from society. If the adolescent girls get proper guidance, they can be great contributors to society, and if not, they might remain frustrated and their suppressed hostility, might, in turn, be very harmful for the upcoming generations to which, they will be mothering (Taywade & Khubalkar, 2019).

In the Chinese study conducted by Chen et al. (2017), the pattern of smartphone usage varied significantly among males and females. Males preferred playing games, watching videos, and listening to music, whereas, females preferred usage of communication and social networking applications.

The literature also reveals significant differences between boys and girls from secondary school students in terms of average daily use of technological devices, particularly in terms of screen time and its effects. Research shows that males generally spend more time on devices than females, with significant impacts on their physical and academic wellbeing. Men are reported to exceed recommended screen time limits more often. 80.7% of men are reported to exceed the 2-hour daily limit compared to 71% of women (Manuja et al., 2024). Another study found that 35.8% of students used their devices for at least 5 hours per day and this behavior was higher in females (22.4%) than males (14.9%) (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2022).

Limits of the Present Study

This study have only reviewed the scientific literature regarding the relationships existing between gender differences and digital media use but it didn't take into account to analyse quantitative data among these studies. Furthermore, this literature review didn't analyzed any other Romanian empirical studies reporting this relationship.

Future Directions

I intend to dive deeper into the literature in order to analyze these data not only on cross-sectional designs, but also on longitudinal ones. Moreover, I intend to extend the knowledge in the scientific literature by reporting also quantitative data thus employing also a meta-analysis using the JASP tool.

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