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First-Year Students' Experiences of the Digital Divide from Gender Perspectives: A Case Study of a South African University

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ABSTRACT

This study is part of a broader research project investigating the disparities in digital skills among first-year students and their use of digital devices at a selected university in South Africa. The study aimed to examine the relationship between gender and first-year students' experiences regarding the digital divide. The digital divide is the gap between those with access to information technology and those without access. It presents significant educational challenges, as it could hinder educational equity, negatively affect students' academic performance, and thus impede social development. The study adopted a quantitative research methodology, using a five-point Likert scale and dichotomous scales to collect–data from 113 randomly selected respondents. It used SPSS to analyse the data. The study conducted descriptive analysis using independent-samples t-tests. The study found no significant relationship between gender and first-year students' access to technology or technological skills. However, it found a significant relationship between gender and the use of technology ($p<0.05$). Therefore, the study proposes using digital literacy in universities to narrow the digital divide. The authors conclude that universities should encourage female students to use technology. The study will contribute to academic scholarship and policymakers' discourse on ensuring gender equality in the use of digital technologies in higher education.

Keywords: First-Year Students, Gender, Digital Devices, Digital Divide

INTRODUCTION

Although Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has spread to every sphere of life, the digital divide persists in education. The digital divide is centred on access to ICT. Digital access encompasses physical access, motivation, skills, and actual usage.[1] All the dimensions of digital access play a significant role in all spheres of life, including education, as they are critical to academic success and career development. However, the digital divide poses a significant gap between those with access to information technology and those without. The United Nations acknowledges the digital divide issues

[1] Kamal Ahmed Soomro et al., "Digital Divide among Higher Education Faculty," *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education* 17, no. 1 (December 20, 2020): 21, https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-020-00191-5.

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and stresses the importance of digital literacy and the digital empowerment of women and girls to achieve gender equality.[2]

Digital literacy is an integral precursor to quality education; it can propel the socio-economic advancement of women and girls, and it represents a critical aspect of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which focus on quality and inclusive education.[3] Likewise, ICT remains an important feature of post-COVID-19 higher education as e-learning has become one of the preferred ways for students to access education.[4] However, the increasing prevalence of digital technology in educational engagement has led to a new set of inequalities from an educational perspective.[5] This set of inequalities concerns access to technology, ownership of the required skills, and use of digital tools, commonly referred to as the digital divide. Van Dijk defines the digital divide as the gap between those who can access and use digital technology and those who cannot.[6]

The relationship between gender and ICT in education is multifaceted, encompassing access, usage, skills, and even self-esteem. Focusing on the digital divide in this study is important because access to and skills for using digital devices remain uneven. Scholars have noted gender disparities in digital technology.[7] Cooper and Weaver highlight the underrepresentation of women in computer ownership, which results in women's inability to participate fully in the digital world and thus limits their access to education and career opportunities.[8] Although women's participation in digital technology has increased, the digital divide persists. This study focuses on ICT access, use, and skills as determinants of the digital divide in higher education, as these factors may affect academic performance. Youssef, Dahmani, and Ragni relate the digital divide to academic performance and found that male students may have more access to digital devices.[9] However, how digital access affects academic performance varies by context; for instance, female students demonstrated higher achievement than male students in 12-14 countries in the communication aspect of digital literacy compared to the technical aspect.[10]

Nevertheless, focusing on gender and first-year students is justifiable in several ways, as the first year is a transitional phase in higher education. From an art and culture perspective, Mbeshu-Mhlauli argues that students often struggle to transition from secondary school into a tertiary institution.[11] This is the year they adapt and adjust to higher education. In fact, exposure to technology is part of the first-year experience. Through this experience, they are expected to develop the skills that will impact their

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[2] Ogechi Adeola, "The Digital Gender Divide and Women's Empowerment in Sub-Saharan Africa: Achieving the UN's 2030 Sustainable Development Goals," in *Empowering African Women for Sustainable Development* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 145–56, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-59102-1_13; R Bahous, "Digital Divide and the Empowerment of Women and Girls. Global Governance Project. G7" (Japan: The Hiroshima Summit, 2023).

[3] Nadine Mumporeze and Michael Prieler, "Gender Digital Divide in Rwanda: A Qualitative Analysis of Socioeconomic Factors," *Telematics and Informatics* 34, no. 7 (November 2017): 1285–93, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2017.05.014; M. P. Treuthart, "Connectivity: The Global Gender Digital Divide and Its Implications for Women's Human Rights and Equality," *Gonz. J. Int'l L* 23, no. 1 (2019).

[4] R. Dlamini, "Digital Revolution in Higher Education during the COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 Era. In Online Teaching and Learning in the COVID-19 Era: Perspectives on Equity and Epistemic Justice" (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023); W Filho et al., " Digital Transformation and Sustainable Development in Higher Education in a Post-Pandemic World.," 2024, 108–23; Ntombozuko Duku et al., "Experiences of B. Ed Students on the Use of E-Learning as a Vehicle to Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic," *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences*, November 3, 2022, 226–37, https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.2022sp31118.

[5] Francisco Javier Palacios Hidalgo, María Elena Gómez Parra, and Cristina Huertas Abril, "Digital and Media Competences: Key Competences for EFL Teachers," 2020.

[6] Jan van Dijk, *The Digital Divide* (Polity Press, 2020).

[7] Anuradha Mathrani, Tarushikha Sarvesh, and Rahila Umer, "Digital Divide Framework: Online Learning in Developing Countries during the COVID-19 Lockdown," *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 20, no. 5 (October 20, 2022): 625–40, https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2021.1981253.

[8] J. Cooper and K.D. Weaver, "Gender and Computers: Understanding the Digital Divide," 2003.

[9] Adel Ben Youssef, Mounir Dahmani, and Ludovic Ragni, "ICT Use, Digital Skills and Students' Academic Performance: Exploring the Digital Divide," *Information* 13, no. 3 (March 3, 2022): 129, https://doi.org/10.3390/info13030129.

[10] Eveline Gebhardt et al., "Gender Differences in Computer and Information Literacy: An In-Depth Analysis of Data from ICILS," 2019.

[11] Nonceba Cynthia Mbeshu-Mhlauli, "The Trajectories of Arts and Culture Students Transitioning from Rural Secondary Contexts to Higher Education: A Self-Study of Practice," *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences*, September 15, 2023, 1089–1100, https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.2023496.

learning, learning performance, and career path.[12] While this transition phase is crucial to these students' journeys, many face challenges related to access, skills, and use of digital technology due to their backgrounds, resulting in inequality. This inequality suggests a need to examine the digital divide among first-year students.

Although South Africa ranks well in digital technology in Africa, the ICT Development Index reveals an increasing digital gap between females and males.[13] However, as Faloye and Ajayi observed, the gender gap in digital technology at higher educational institutions is often overlooked.[14] This is because, despite numerous studies on information technology and first-year students in higher education in South Africa, few studies analyse students' experiences by gender and the relative value of ICT exposure among first-year students. Despite rapid advances in digital technology and the expansion of ICT, the digital divide has significant implications for gender and higher education. Accordingly, Thinyane found that students' experiences with ICT are not homogeneous; they differ in access, skills, and usage.[15] This study investigates disparities in digital access, skills, and technology use among first-year female and male students to determine whether gender differences exist, as they all undergo the same digital literacy training sessions during their induction programme at the university. Since access to ICT, skills, and usage are integral to teaching and learning, it is crucial to identify and address further chasms in the digital divide, as this is essential for understanding and resolving the issue.[16]

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Divide

The digital divide is a gap between individuals who have access to, use, and have skills with ICT and individuals who do not.[17] Digital access is crucial in determining the digital divide and its possibilities. Digital access is a multifaceted concept. It includes psychological, material, usage, and skill factors.[18] Psychological access concerns fear and willingness to use digital devices, while material access refers to owning the tools necessary to continue using the internet and technological gadgets, such as phones, laptops, and desktops. Skill access concerns the ability to use digital devices, whereas usage denotes the ability to utilise them effectively. However, digital access is intertwined with technological, social, and cultural frameworks. Socio-cultural norms can impede digital possibilities and limit users' skills and capabilities. Additionally, Oyedemi noted a chasm between students residing in urban and rural areas, as the former are more likely than other groups of students to engage effectively with digital devices because they are more conversant with internet use.[19] Nonetheless, the skills and knowledge

[12] Toks Dele Oyedemi, "Digital Inequalities and Implications for Social Inequalities: A Study of Internet Penetration amongst University Students in South Africa," *Telematics and Informatics* 29, no. 3 (August 2012): 302–13, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2011.12.001; M Iansiti and G Richards, "Coronavirus Is Widening the Corporate Digital Divide," *Harvard Business Review*, 2020, 26.

[13] R. Lembani et al., "The Same Course, Different Access: The Digital Divide Between Urban and Rural Distance Education Students in South Africa," *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 44, no. 1 (2020).

[14] Samuel T. Faloye and Nurudeen Ajayi, "Understanding the Impact of the Digital Divide on South African Students in Higher Educational Institutions," *African Journal of Science, Technology, Innovation and Development* 14, no. 7 (November 10, 2022): 1734–44, https://doi.org/10.1080/20421338.2021.1983118.

[15] Hannah Thinyane, "Are Digital Natives a World-Wide Phenomenon? An Investigation into South African First Year Students' Use and Experience with Technology," *Computers & Education* 55, no. 1 (2010): 406–14.

[16] Herman G. van de Werfhorst, Emma Kessenich, and Sara Geven, "The Digital Divide in Online Education: Inequality in Digital Readiness of Students and Schools," *Computers and Education Open* 3 (December 2022): 100100, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.caeo.2022.100100; Ioannis Lampropoulos et al., "The Contribution of Education and ICT Knowledge in Sustainable Development Perceptions: The Case of Higher Education Students in Greece," *Journal of Human Resource and Sustainability Studies* 12, no. 01 (2024): 15–31, https://doi.org/10.4236/jhrss.2024.121002.

[17] J.E Dolan, "Splicing the Divide: A Review of Research on the Evolving Digital Divide Among K–12 Students," *Journal of Research on Technology in Education* 48, no. 1 (2016); Kevin Namiiro Kuteesa, Chidiogo Uzoamaka Akpuokwe, and Chioma Ann Udeh, "Theoretical Perspectives on Digital Divide and ICT Access: Comparative Study of Rural Communities in Africa and the United States," *Computer Science & It Research Journal* 5, no. 4 (2024): 839–49; Alexander JAM van Deursen and Jan AGM van Dijk, "The First-Level Digital Divide Shifts from Inequalities in Physical Access to Inequalities in Material Access," *New Media & Society* 21, no. 2 (February 7, 2019): 354–75, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818797082; M Deen-Swarray et al., " Lifting The Veil on ICT Gender Indicators in Africa. Evidence for ICT Policy Action, Policy Paper 13," 2012.

[18] Oyedemi, "Digital Inequalities and Implications for Social Inequalities: A Study of Internet Penetration amongst University Students in South Africa."

[19] Oyedemi, "Digital Inequalities and Implications for Social Inequalities: A Study of Internet Penetration amongst University Students in South Africa."

needed to use digital tools are important, as their absence constitutes a digital divide. Digital skills can be defined as users' ability to utilise ICT critically and innovatively to achieve various goals.[20] For example, Henry argued that internet use can be explored by providing students with effective internet education as part of an integrated approach to teaching and learning in schools.[21] This is important because, as Oyedemi posits, the younger generation is technologically inclined and extensively utilises the Internet and other digital communication technologies for different reasons.[22]

Penard et al. asserted that it is crucial to equip Internet users with the knowledge to have a better online experience and to maximise the potential benefits of using the Internet.[23] The emphasis on digital skills is becoming increasingly prevalent in institutions of higher learning, as contemporary university students belong to a tech-savvy generation characterised by the rapid expansion of IT infrastructure and the remarkable advancement of online media, including web browsing, virtual reality, AI, and robotics.[24] Park and Kwon studied the digital divide from multidisciplinary perspectives, presenting it as a multifaceted phenomenon with social, economic, cultural, and political underpinnings.[25] Socioeconomic and demographic factors were associated with ICT disparities. Although developing countries face numerous social inequalities, the digital divide is a pervasive and persistent form of social inequality. Gender is another vital factor that has gained prominence in the present era of digitalisation. Singh asserted that today's most prominent component of the global digital divide is the inequitable access to and use of digital technologies between men and women.[26]

Digital Divide from Gender Perspectives: A Conceptual Framework

Cooper and Weaver used gender as a yardstick to explain the digital divide, asserting that, compared with men, women have been underrepresented in computer use and ownership.[27] Lopez-Sintas, Lamberti, and Sukphan adopted the resources and appropriation theory in their research to address the digital divide between the digital lower class in poor nations and the variations in Internet access and usage.[28] The perception of technology as a gendered space highlights how people are socio-culturally indoctrinated from childhood to establish diverse connections with technology at home and school.[29] However, universities and university libraries play an indispensable role in bridging the digital divide.

The digital divide is a critical social challenge linked to the increasing use and advancement of technologies.[30] It affects the advancement of the information society.[31] It is underpinned by inequality in access and skills. Subsequently, it perpetuates the prevalent social inequalities, particularly affecting marginalised groups such as women.[32] Structural factors often hinder women and girls' access to ICT,

[20] Iansiti and Richards, "Coronavirus Is Widening the Corporate Digital Divide."
[21] L.A. Henry, "Tertiary Level Digital Divide: A More Complex Understanding and Broadened Definition," in *Proceedings of the IADIS International Conference E-Society*, 2008.
[22] Oyedemi, "Digital Inequalities and Implications for Social Inequalities: A Study of Internet Penetration amongst University Students in South Africa."
[23] Thierry Penard et al., "Internet Adoption and Usage Patterns in Africa: Evidence from Cameroon," *Technology in Society* 42 (2015): 71–80.
[24] Iansiti and Richards, "Coronavirus Is Widening the Corporate Digital Divide."
[25] J. Park and Y. Kwon, *New Stratification Perspectives on the Digital Divide: A Four-Scale Analysis Model*, vol. 1 (IJPGN, 2013).
[26] Sumanjeet Singh, "Bridging the Gender Digital Divide in Developing Countries," *Journal of Children and Media* 11, no. 2 (April 3, 2017): 245–47, https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2017.1305604.
[27] Cooper and Weaver, "Gender and Computers: Understanding the Digital Divide."
[28] Jordi Lopez-Sintas, Giuseppe Lamberti, and Jakkapong Sukphan, "The Social Structuring of the Digital Gap in a Developing Country. The Impact of Computer and Internet Access Opportunities on Internet Use in Thailand," *Technology in Society* 63 (November 2020): 101433, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techsoc.2020.101433.
[29] Laura J. Dixon et al., "Gendered Space: The Digital Divide between Male and Female Users in Internet Public Access Sites," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 19, no. 4 (July 2014): 991–1009, https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12088.
[30] Everett M. Rogers, "The Digital Divide," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 7, no. 4 (December 1, 2001): 96–111, https://doi.org/10.1177/135485650100700406; L Ye and H Yang, "From Digital Divide to Social Inclusion: A Tale of Mobile Platform Empowerment in Rural Areas." ('Trends and Challenges of Digital Divide and Digital Inclusion: A...'),"* *Sustainability* 12, no. 6 (2020).
[31] Gloria Goncalves, Tiago Oliveira, and Frederico Cruz-Jesus, "Understanding Individual-Level Digital Divide: Evidence of an African Country," *Computers in Human Behavior* 87 (October 2018): 276–91, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.05.039.
[32] Mathrani, Sarvesh, and Umer, "Digital Divide Framework: Online Learning in Developing Countries during the COVID-19 Lockdown."

including inadequate technological infrastructure and a lack of educational or institutional prospects.[33] According to Lai and Widmar, women often prioritise family and domestic responsibilities over career advancement.[34] Likewise, limited digital opportunities often affect their participation in the digital world, especially among those without readily available internet access.

The metaphor of digital theory, presented by Jan Van Dijk, was used to enhance understanding in this study.[35] The theory posits that resources are distributed unequally due to categorical disparities and inequitable allocation, resulting in unequal access to digital technology.[36] It also explains that the nature of digital technologies contributes to disparities in access. The theory asserts that unequal participation in society perpetuates categorical inequalities and unequal distribution of resources. The central claim of this theory is that different personal and positional categories of people have varying resources for adopting this two-level process and reaping its benefits through technology appropriation.[37]

Van Dijk asserted that the divide could also be viewed as unequal, where some people have greater access to modern technology than others.[38] The theoretical framework of the digital divide encompasses access to a computer and an internet connection. It also concerns digital inequality, digital knowledge, skills, and usage. These are paramount to this study because it explores and evaluates the disparities in digital access, usage, and skills among first-year students. Gender itself is an essential category for understanding digital inequality at all levels.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a quantitative descriptive research design. This descriptive design enabled the evaluation of variables and identification of characteristics within the chosen population. The study sought to determine the relationship between first-year students' experiences of digital devices and gender. As such, it assessed the following hypotheses:

H^0: There is no relationship between gender and first-year students' access to digital technology.
$H^{0:}$ There is no relationship between gender and first-year students' usage of digital technology.
$H^{0:}$ There is no relationship between gender and first-year students' digital technology skills.

Research Methods

The research instrument consisted of structured questions. Data were collected using dichotomous (yes/no) questions and 5-point Likert-scale questions, with response options: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Disagree/Agree, Agree, and Strongly Agree. Since this method allows respondents to select answers from a finite set of options, it limits the likelihood of invalid responses. Due to their reliability and frequency of use, questionnaires are a widely utilised data collection method, especially suitable for quantitative research, making them appropriate for this study.

Research Instruments

The study used a survey questionnaire to collect data. The questionnaire was developed based on the literature and theoretical framework used to understand the study. It is divided into three sections. Section A consists of demographic questions. Section B consists of eight dichotomous questions focusing on the respondent's general experience with digital technology. Section C comprises 5-point Likert-scale questions focusing on respondents' access to, usage of, and skills with digital devices. The researchers self-designed the instrument using Google Forms.

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[33] Singh, "Bridging the Gender Digital Divide in Developing Countries."
[34] John Lai and Nicole O. Widmar, "Revisiting the Digital Divide in the COVID-19 Era," *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy* 43, no. 1 (March 12, 2021): 458–64, https://doi.org/10.1002/aepp.13104.
[35] Jan van Dijk, "A Framework for Digital Divide Research," *Electronic Journal of Communication* 12, no. 1 (2002); Jan A.G.M. van Dijk, "Digital Divide Research, Achievements and Shortcomings," *Poetics* 34, no. 4–5 (August 2006): 221–35, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2006.05.004; Jan van Dijk, "A Theory of the Digital Divide," In The *Digital Divide*, vol. 1, 2013, 29–51; Jan van Dijk, "Digital Divide: Impact of Access," *The International Encyclopedia of Media Effects*, 2017, 41.
[36] van Dijk, "Digital Divide: Impact of Access."
[37] van Dijk, *The Digital Divide*.
[38] van Dijk, *The Digital Divide*.

Validity and Reliability of the Instruments

Validity and reliability are the two most crucial aspects of evaluating any measuring instrument.[39] Faculty reviewers and the university ethics committee reviewed the instruments for consistency, clarity, and their ability to measure the study's concepts accurately. The internal consistency of the questionnaires was assessed using Cronbach's alpha in SPSS. The reliability scores for the three measured concepts are as follows: Access, 0.570; Usage, 0.792; and Skills, 0.893. The concepts included 5, 7, and 5 items, respectively.

Data Collection and Analysis

The study adopted a descriptive analysis. The collected data were analysed using SPSS. Accordingly, the study used an independent-samples t-test to compare the mean scores of female and male respondents. The analysis sought to determine whether female and male respondents had divergent experiences regarding digital access, skills, and usage.

The process began by downloading the Google Forms responses into Microsoft Excel, followed by data cleaning, which involved assigning numbers to variables and labelling the categories. Subsequently, the data were uploaded to SPSS for labelling and reliability tests. Next, the analysis was reported using descriptive statistics, including graphs, tables, and cross-tabulations, to understand the data and visually identify relevant traits.

Ethical Considerations

After the faculty's research committee reviewed and approved the proposal, the university's research ethics committee granted ethical clearance prior to the study's commencement. As such, the study adhered to ethical principles, including respect for participants, voluntary participation, and confidentiality. The study was conducted on the selected university's campus. Consent to participate was sought and obtained from the respondents. The target population was the first-year students. Of the 185 randomly selected respondents, only 113 (61%) consented and responded to the questionnaires distributed.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study aimed to determine whether a significant difference exists between the mean scores for the following concepts: digital access, usage, and skills between female and male respondents. The first section of the questionnaire was administered to understand participants' characteristics in relation to their gender identity. Gender identity is a core element of the study. Gender identity refers to how a person perceives themselves. Age, socioeconomic status, and educational backgrounds were also presented to help the participants visually understand their backgrounds. The following section presents the demographic attributes of the respondents.

Gender Demographic Information

Figure 1 illustrates the frequency of respondents' gender identities. Gender formed the basis for this study. Acknowledging gender as fluid, the study's questionnaires categorised participants as female, male, bisexual, transgender, non-binary, and 'other' to represent those whose gender identity was not included in these categories. However, most participants identified as female or male. Figure 1 shows the distribution of respondents based on gender identity.

[39] Haradhan Kumar Mohajan, "Two Criteria for Good Measurements in Research: Validity and Reliability," *Annals of Spiru Haret University. Economic Series* 17, no. 4 (2017): 59–82.

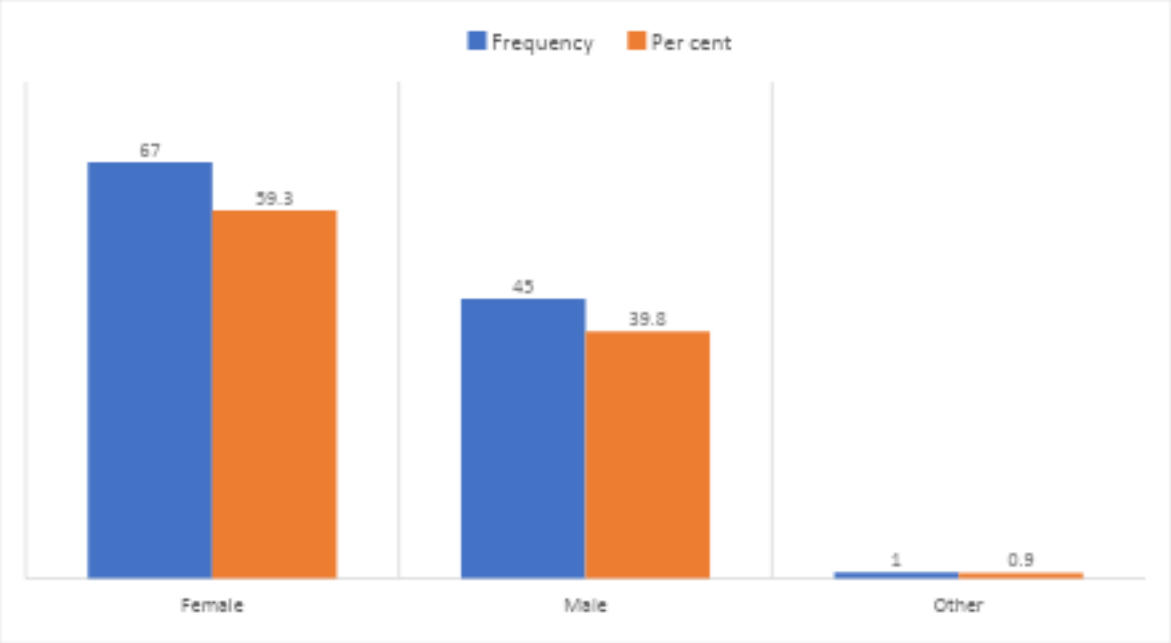


Figure 1: Respondents' Distribution by Gender Identity

The statistics in Figure 1 indicate that more females than males participated in the survey. This aligns with the typical scenario at the selected university, where there are more registered female students. The demographic information also reflects the gender distribution in South African higher education. Most respondents were between 18 and 23 (71.7%). Respondents come from different socio-economic backgrounds and have left high school to enrol in university. The researchers asked questions about respondents' socio-economic background to understand students' social standing, as social status plays a critical role in shaping an individual's level of digital access and competence. Table 1 shows that 54% of students are from middle-class homes, 31.9% from working-class homes, and 14.2% from upper-class homes.

Table 1: Respondents' Socio-economic Backgrounds

	Frequency	Per cent	Valid percentage	Cumulative Percent
Working Class	36	31.9	31.9	31.9
Middle Class	61	54.0	54.0	85.8
Upper Class	16	14.2	14.2	100.0
Total	113	100.0	100.0	

Respondents' Experiences of Digital Devices: Finding Relationships Between Gender and Digital Devices

The study measured the relationship between respondents' gender and experiences with digital devices. This aimed to assess whether the gender divide persists among first-year undergraduate students. According to Soomro et al., digital literacy has the potential to revolutionise the socioeconomic advancement of women and girls. [40] Information and communication technologies have an immeasurable impact on higher education, including access to knowledge, enhanced communication skills, and increased competitiveness of the educational sector. The following independent variables were compared with gender using an independent-samples t-test to examine mean scores of the two main identity variables (female and male students). The purpose was to assess whether gender differed across variables. Independent-samples t-tests were used to compare scores for gender and prior

[40] Soomro et al., "Digital Divide among Higher Education Faculty."

experience with digital devices, gender and access to digital devices, gender and skills with digital devices, and gender and usage of digital devices shown in the following tables.

Gender and Prior Experiences of Digital Devices

Respondents' experiences before gaining admission to the university were measured. The variable was derived from yes/no questions to gain insight into students' backgrounds before participating in the university's digital literacy programme. This was done to determine whether they experienced gender-specific norms deeply entrenched in many cultures and households.[41]The questionnaires include the following: *Have you ever been restricted from using your phone at home? Do you and other family members have equal access to the internet at home? Did you attend the first-year orientation programme on the use of technology?*

Table 2: Respondents' Prior Experiences of Digital Devices

Group Statistics										
		Gender	N	Mean	Std/D	Std Error Mean				
Prior Experience with Technology (PTE)		Female	67	22.58	3.702	.452				
		Male	45	22.58	3.882	.579				
Independent Sample t-Test										
Levene's for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						95% Confidence Interval		
		F	Sig.	T	Df	One-sided p	Two-sided p	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Lower	Upper
PET	Equal variances assumed	.160	.690	.006	110	.498.	.995	.004	.728	-1.437	1.446
	Equal variances not assumed			.006	91.423	. 498	.995	.004	.743	-1454	1.463

The results show no significant difference in prior experience between the two groups assessed in the study (female and male students). The significance value of 0.690 is higher than 0.5, suggesting that these students had similar exposure to technology before gaining university admission, when considering gender. The findings align with Adeyele, who found similarities between female and male experiences with technology, while also acknowledging that females are often deprived of the space or time to engage with computers due to gendered sociocultural norms.[42] Acknowledging social and cultural norms is crucial in the African context, given the patriarchal nature of our society.[43] However, based on the socio-economic background results, it can be aptly argued that most respondents (85%)

[41] Van Dijk, *The Digital Divide*.

[42] Victoria Olubola Adeyele, "Perceived Differences in VR Experiences: A Gender-Based Analysis of Adoption and Engagement," *Journal Eduscience* 11, no. 3 (2024): 691–702.

[43] Darla Urmiche Diya Lipoko et al., "The Pitfalls of Neglecting the Integration of Young Women in Business: The Case of the Democratic Republic of Congo," in *Reshaping Sustainable Development Goals Implementation in the World: Proceeding of 7th International Conference on Business and Management Dynamics* (Book Publisher International (a part of Sciencedomain International), 2021), 252–74, https://doi.org/10.9734/bpi/mono/978-93-5547-236-6/CH18.

come from middle-class backgrounds. This factor may have contributed to the similarity because a middle-class background might provide a more nuanced experience of the digital divide.[44]

Experiences of Gender and Access to Digital Devices

Gender and access to digital devices were measured to determine whether scores differ significantly between female and male respondents. The concept consisted of five variables: *ACS1 – I hardly have time to browse the internet due to household chores; ACS2 -I only have internet access while on campus; ACS3 - I use my phone to access most of the information needed for my assignments; ACS4 - As a year one student, I own a computer; and ACS5 - My internet connection is always problematic.*

Table 3: Respondents' Experiences of Digital Access

Group Statistics											
Access to Digital Devices			Gender	N	Mean		Std/D		Std/D Error		
			Female	67	16.8955		2.69755		.32956		
			Male	44	17.3182		2.19696		.33120		
Independent Sample t-Test											
Levene's for Equality of Variances				t-test for Equality of Means						95% Confidence Interval	
		F	Sig.	T	Df	One-sided p	Two-sided p	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Lower	Upper
Access to digital devices	Equal variances assumed	.788	.677	-.867	109	.194	.788	-42266	.48744	-1.30875	.54343
	Equal variances not assumed			-.905	103.926	.184	.668	-.42266	.46723	-1.34920	.50389

Table 3 results show that the digital device score, at a significance level of .677, is higher than the accepted level of significance of .05. The results indicate no significant difference in respondents' experiences with access to digital devices. Respondents' experiences contradict Singh's findings, which stated that women's and girls' access to ICT in underdeveloped nations is severely hindered by structural factors, e.g., limited institutional opportunities to access ICT and limited access to ICT in public areas where girls do not feel at ease.[45] This study reveals equal access to digital devices among female and male respondents in a higher education environment. It shows that providing access to digital devices could help alleviate the digital divide in higher education settings.

Experiences of Gender and Usage of Digital Devices

To gain insight into respondents' use of digital devices, the following variables were measured: USG1 *– I often use the internet for social media; USG2 – I use the internet for informational purposes. USG3 – I utilise technology to facilitate personalised and interactive learning. USG4 – I utilise the internet to access Moodle. USG5 – I utilise digital devices for personal and academic growth.*

Based on the foregoing results, a significant nexus exists between gender and the use of digital devices, with a p-value of 0.05. The study aligns with Yildiz and Varsak, who found that male students use digital

[44] Lipoko et al., "The Pitfalls of Neglecting the Integration of Young Women in Business: The Case of the Democratic Republic of Congo"; Lembani et al., "The Same Course, Different Access: The Digital Divide Between Urban and Rural Distance Education Students in South Africa."

[45] Singh, "Bridging the Gender Digital Divide in Developing Countries."

devices more than their female counterparts. While the study reveals equal access to digital devices between female and male students, it shows differences in their usage.[46]

Table 4: Respondents' Experiences of Digital Usage

Group Statistics											
The use of a Digital Device		Gender		N		Mean		Std/D		Std/Error	
		Female		67		20.9403		2.72408		.44064	
		Male		64		17.3182		2.19696		.33120	
Independent Sample t-Test											
Levene's for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means								95% Confidence Interval	
		F	Sig.	T	Df	One-sided p	Two-sided p	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Lower	Upper
Use of digital devices	Equal variances assumed	.014	.05	-197	107	.422	.040	-.10764	.54748	-.19295	.97767
	Equal variances are not assumed			-.194	89.553	.423	.060	-.10764	.55586	-.12123	.99675

Experiences of Gender and skills of digital device skills

Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with the following*: SKL1- I can resolve virus-related issues; SKL2 I can download materials for my assignments; SKL3 -I am good at installing software from the internet; SKL4 -When it comes to technology, I consider myself to be exceptional; SKL5 – I am proficient in typing; SKL6 – I am familiar with technical tools necessary for online learning; and SKL7 -Varsity has exposed me to relevant digital literacy.*

This study found no significant relationship between gender and digital device skills (p-value = .664). However, findings regarding the relationship between gender and digital skills have been mixed, depending on the context and region. Saha and Zaman found that female students perform less well in critical computer skills, whereas male students are more proficient in navigating PowerPoint and MS Word.[47] In their meta-analysis, Campos and Scherer found that female students outperform male students in technology skills. Like Gebhardt et al., they also noted the issue of context. Subsequently, the provision of digital literacy in the higher education context becomes significant, as it could provide a basis for acquiring skills.[48]

[46] A. Yildiz and S. Varsak, "Gender Differences in Technological Device Usage Times of Secondary School Students. 4th International Conference on Frontiers in Academic Research," 2024.

[47] Sumi Rani Saha and Md. Ohidur Zaman, "Gender Digital Divide in Higher Education: A Study on University of Barisal, Bangladesh," *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 22, no. 01 (January 2017): 11–17, https://doi.org/10.9790/0837-2201041117.; Campos, Diego G., and Ronny Scherer. "Digital gender gaps in Students' knowledge, attitudes and skills: an integrative data analysis across 32 Countries."

[48] Eveline Gebhardt et al., *Gender Differences in Computer and Information Literacy*, vol. 8 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-26203-7.

Table 5: Respondents' Experiences of Digital Skills

Group Statistics					
	Gender	N	Mean	Std/D	Std/Error
Skill of Digital Devices	Female	67	23.8507	2.95590	.44064
	Male	64	25.2222	6.89166	.02735

Independent Sample t-Test											
Levene's for Equality of Variances				t-test for Equality of Means						95% Confidence Interval	
		F	Sig.	T	Df	One-sided p	Two-sided p	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Lower	Upper
Skills with digital devices	Equal variances assumed	.190	.664	-1.382	110	.085	.670	-1.37148	.99205	-.3.33749	.59454
	Equal variances are not assumed			-1.231	59.678	.112	.723	-1.37148	1.11441	-3.60087	.85791

Discussion Summary

The study has argued that the digital divide is a social challenge underpinned by inequality in access, usage, and digital technology skills. Notably, the study emphasised the importance of access to, use of, and skills in digital technology for enriching teaching and learning in higher education institutions. It argued that gender is integral to examining the digital divide, as women and girls are underrepresented in digital technology ownership, skills, and use. It used a descriptive research design to evaluate first-year female and male students' experiences of digital devices. The aim was to determine the relationship between first-year students' experiences with digital devices and gender. As such, it assessed the following hypotheses: H^0: *There is no relationship between gender and first-year students' access to digital technology, and gender and the skills and usage of digital technology.* $H^{1:}$ *There is a relationship between gender and first-year students' access to digital technology, and gender and the skills and usage of digital technology.*

One of the most significant findings from this study is that the experiences of female and male students in an educational setting regarding digital access and skills are, in fact, similar. It also indicates no significant relationship between gender and technology skills among first-year students. Furthermore, the study reveals no significant relationship between gender and first-year students' access to technology. However, it reveals a significant relationship between gender and technology use ($p<0.05$), with male students using digital devices more than female students, suggesting a substantial disparity. The findings support the proposition on gender and digital device use, while the other propositions on gender, skills, and access were rejected.

Although the study found no significant relationship between gender and technological access or skills, the study underscores the importance of addressing barriers that impede female students' use of technology. Soomro et al. revealed that incorporating digital technology into educational settings improves the accessibility and quality of teaching and learning, particularly in knowledge acquisition and dissemination.[49] The assessment of female use of the digital divide in this study corroborates Mathrani et al., who found that female users are often restrained from fully utilising digital opportunities because they sometimes conform to socio-cultural gender-specific norms.[50] Nevertheless, the study

[49] Soomro et al., "Digital Divide among Higher Education Faculty."
[50] Mathrani, Sarvesh, and Umer, "Digital Divide Framework: Online Learning in Developing Countries during the COVID-19 Lockdown."

emphasises the importance of integrating digital literacy and ensuring an environment in which students have equal digital access and opportunities, regardless of their gender or social background.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study proposes maintaining digital literacy through a hands-on workshop to narrow the gender digital gap in technology use. It recommends encouraging female students to engage more with digital technology, as this will equip them with inclusive digital skills and improve their technology use regardless of social background. To further contribute to scholarship, the study recommends that future studies investigate not only students' experiences with access, skills, and use of digital devices, but also conduct regular surveys that prioritise the innovative use of ICT by both female and male students. Additionally, students' experiences with ICT should be evaluated immediately after they resume university, and the findings should be compared with their experiences after exposure to the university's digital environment.

CONCLUSION

The study finds no significant relationship between gender and first-year students' access to technology, nor between gender and technological skills. However, it revealed a significant relationship between gender and the use of technology ($p<0.05$). Ultimately, this study concludes that integrating digital literacy in universities offers a viable strategy for alleviating the digital divide. Eradicating the digital divide also requires encouraging female students to engage with digital technology and providing inclusive digital skills acquisition for all disadvantaged students. Young people who are immersed in digital technologies intuitively acquire digital skills. Additionally, digital devices and the internet will invariably mitigate any digital divide. The study will contribute to academic and policymakers' discourses on how to ensure gender equality in the use of digital technologies in higher education.

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