



The role of family communication in shaping gender roles and socialization in children in a digital world

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Abstract

This research explores the critical role of family communication in shaping gender roles and socialization in children within the context of a digital world. The increasing prevalence of digital media has significantly transformed how children perceive and internalize gender norms, offering exposure to diverse representations of gender, including non-binary and fluid identities. This paper investigates the ways in which family communication spanning parent child interactions, sibling influences, and extended family dynamics shapes children's gender identity development and socialization. Drawing on key theoretical frameworks such as Social Learning Theory, Cognitive Development Theory, and Gender Schema Theory, the paper examines how children learn gender roles through family interactions and digital media. It also addresses the challenges families face in navigating the generational divide between parents raised in a pre digital age and children as digital natives, highlighting the tensions between traditional family values and progressive digital portrayals of gender. The implications for parenting, policy, and education are discussed, offering recommendations for parents to engage in open communication and media literacy, as well as for schools and policymakers to support families in fostering inclusive gender development. This review emphasizes the need for further empirical research, particularly longitudinal studies, to better understand the long term effects of digital media on children's gender socialization. Ultimately, this paper also underscores the importance of family communication as a foundational element in shaping children's gender identity in the digital era.

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1. Introduction

Family communication plays a pivotal role in shaping the developmental trajectory of children, particularly in the formation of gender roles and identity. From a young age, children observe and imitate their parents, caregivers, and other family members, learning the gendered expectations that are embedded in societal norms (McHale *et al.*, 2003)^[14]. Traditionally, family dynamics, such as parental conversations, reinforcement of gendered behavior, and modeling, have influenced children's understanding of gender (Krishna *et al.*, 2024)^[11]. However, with the proliferation of digital media in recent years, these family communication practices have become increasingly intertwined with the influence of the digital world. Children today are exposed to a vast range of digital platforms, including social media, video games, and digital advertisements, which present often stereotypical or evolving portrayals of gender roles (Eichen *et al.*, 2021)^[7]. This digital shift has introduced new complexities in family

communication surrounding gender identity, as parents and caregivers must navigate the changing landscape of gender norms in the digital age (Qian & Hu 2024) ^[18]. The growing accessibility of the internet and digital devices has led to an exponential increase in children's engagement with online content, raising critical questions about how these digital interactions influence their gender socialization. While families still play a central role in shaping children's perceptions of gender, the role of digital media has become a significant factor that may reinforce or challenge traditional gender expectations (Molla 2016) ^[16]. As a result, understanding the interplay between family communication and digital media exposure is crucial to comprehend how children today are socialized into gender roles. This review aims to explore the role of family communication in shaping gender roles and socialization in children, particularly within the context of a rapidly evolving digital world. The integration of family practices with digital media influences is examined to understand the shifting dynamics of gender identity formation in contemporary childhood development.

2. Literature Review

The role of family communication in shaping gender roles and socialization has been a well established area of research, with scholars emphasizing how families influence children's gender development through verbal interactions, role modeling, and reinforcement of societal norms (Ummah 2025) ^[21]. However, with the increasing presence of digital media in the lives of children, studies suggest that family communication regarding gender socialization is now mediated by new digital environments, which complicates the traditional understanding of how gender roles are passed down through generations (Livingstone 2017) ^[13].

Research has highlighted the significant influence of digital media on children's gender identity development. Valkenburg and Piotrowski (2017) ^[22] argue that the portrayal of gender in digital platforms such as social media and video games contributes significantly to children's gender role construction. They emphasize that while children receive gendered messages from the family, these messages can be countered or reinforced by the digital content they encounter. Similarly, A study by Valkenburg and Piotrowski 2017 ^[22] found that digital platforms often expose children to gender stereotypes that challenge traditional family teachings, presenting more fluid and diverse gender representations. These findings suggest that family communication needs to address not only traditional gender expectations but also the evolving and often contradictory messages children receive online.

Family communication patterns have been shown to influence how children process and respond to digital media messages about gender. (Wright 2017) ^[24] explored the interaction between parental mediation of digital content and children's gender socialization. Their study found that children whose parents engaged in active discussions about gendered content in media were better equipped to critically analyze and question stereotypes in digital media. Conversely, children whose parents avoided conversations about gender and digital content tended to internalize gender norms uncritically. This underscores the role of active family engagement in shaping children's ability to navigate digital gender representations. Moreover, (Villegas 2013) ^[23] examined the influence of family communication on

children's gender role development, noting that children's interactions with family members were crucial in solidifying their gender identity, especially in a digital world. Families that engaged in conversations about gender roles within the context of digital media exposure fostered more open and flexible attitudes toward gender identity in their children. This finding aligns with those of (Santoniccolo *et al.*, 2023) ^[19] who identified a shift toward more progressive gender beliefs in families that explicitly discussed online content, including social media, where gender fluidity is increasingly represented.

Digital media's impact on gender socialization is also examined in the context of social learning theory. According to Stockard (2006) ^[20], children learn gendered behavior by observing and imitating those around them, particularly in media. In this regard, social media platforms have become important spaces for children to observe various gender expressions and behaviors media exposure, particularly online platforms, has become a primary source of gender modeling, alongside family interactions. However, the family still plays a central role in framing how children interpret these media portrayals. Further studies have noted the generational gap in understanding gender roles between parents and children. Parents who were raised in more traditional environments often struggle to understand the complexities of gender identity in the digital age (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017) ^[22]. This gap can lead to difficulties in guiding children through gendered content online. Additionally, the increasing digitalization of daily life presents challenges for parents who may lack the digital literacy required to critically assess the media their children consume. Parents' ability to mediate digital content and engage in conversations about gender influences how effectively they can navigate this gap.

The portrayal of gender in video games is another area where family communication plays a significant role. Research by Barrera *et al.*, (2025) ^[3] showed that many video games, particularly those targeted at young children, reinforce stereotypical gender roles, depicting women in passive roles and men in dominant roles. Children's exposure to these portrayals, coupled with family communication about these representations, can affect how they internalize gender roles. Studies have shown that active family discussions about these representations can mitigate their impact on children's gender development (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017) ^[22]. Furthermore, the rapid increase in the use of social media by children has been found to be both a source of gender reinforcement and challenge. Gender specific content, such as beauty standards, is rampant on platforms like Instagram, often reinforcing traditional gender roles (Kushwaha, 2020) ^[12]. However, social media also provides a platform for diverse gender expressions, offering children a broader spectrum of gender identity to explore (Are *et al.*, 2024). This dual influence of social media necessitates a thoughtful and nuanced approach to family communication, where parents actively guide their children's understanding of gender while acknowledging the influence of digital media.

Additionally, research by Krishna *et al.*, 2024 ^[11] suggests that the role of gender neutral parenting has been influenced by digital media. The exposure of both boys and girls to a wide range of gender identities online has led to more families adopting gender neutral parenting approaches. However, families' comfort levels with this shift vary

significantly, with many still adhering to traditional gender norms (Cislaghi & Heise 2020) ^[6]. This variability suggests that family communication must evolve to address these new complexities in gender identity formation.

While traditional family communication remains vital in shaping children's gender identity, the influence of digital media presents both opportunities and challenges. Studies highlight the need for families to engage critically with digital content, facilitating conversations that allow children to navigate gender representations in a complex digital world. The interplay between family communication and digital media is a dynamic field that continues to evolve, requiring further exploration to understand its long term effects on gender socialization in children.

3. Discussion

3.1 Theoretical Background

Several prominent theories provide insight into how children develop gender roles, especially in the context of family communication and digital media exposure.

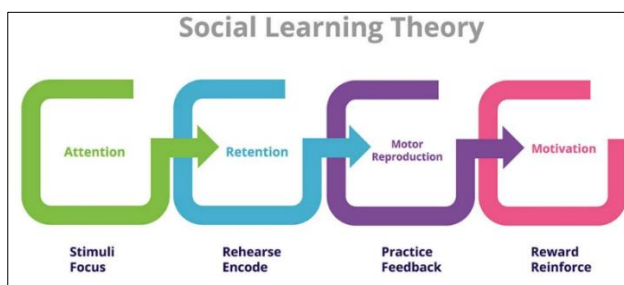


Fig 1: Social Learning Theory (Aziz & Osman 2025) ^[2]

Social Learning Theory, introduced by Albert Bandura, suggests that children learn gender roles through observation and imitation of those around them, particularly family members. This process, often referred to as modeling, occurs when children observe behaviors exhibited by parents, siblings, or other influential figures within the family and replicate them. Bandura's theory posits that behaviors are learned through reinforcement and punishment, with gender specific behaviors often being rewarded or encouraged. In the digital age, this theory is increasingly relevant, as children not only model behaviors observed in their immediate family but also through media exposure (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017) ^[22]. For instance, gendered portrayals in digital media such as television shows, social media, and video games serve as additional models for children to imitate. Studies have shown that children often mimic the behaviors they observe in digital content, which can either reinforce traditional gender roles or promote more fluid gender identities (Ben Abd Elsalam 2023) ^[4].

Cognitive Development Theory, emphasizes how children actively construct their gender identity over time through interactions with their environment. According to Kohlberg's theory, children go through stages of gender identity development, beginning with the recognition of gender as a stable category at around age three and continuing to understand gender consistency and the roles associated with each gender. Cognitive Development Theory suggests that as children mature, they begin to internalize gender related information and apply it to their own behavior. This process is influenced by family interactions, where children first learn

about gender expectations, and increasingly, by digital media, which offers a broader range of gendered experiences. In the digital world, platforms such as YouTube and social media networks expose children to diverse perspectives on gender, allowing them to experiment with and challenge traditional gender norms.

Gender Schema Theory, further refines our understanding of gender identity by explaining how children internalize societal expectations about gender roles. Gender schemas are cognitive structures that organize knowledge about gender and influence how children interpret their experiences. These schemas are formed early in childhood, often as a result of interactions with family members who model gendered behaviors and reinforce societal expectations. Bem's theory suggests that children filter their experiences and interactions through these gendered lenses, which in turn shape their behavior and attitudes. In the context of digital media, these schemas are both reinforced and challenged. For example, children may encounter media representations of gender that align with or deviate from their existing schemas. Studies have shown that digital media, with its diverse portrayals of gender, has the potential to either reinforce traditional gender norms or disrupt them, depending on the content consumed (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017) ^[22].

Finally, Family Systems Theory, emphasizes the importance of family communication patterns in shaping children's development. This theory highlights the interconnectedness of family members and how changes in one member's behavior can influence others. Family communication patterns, such as open versus restrictive communication, are critical in understanding how gender roles are transmitted. Families that maintain open lines of communication about gender and engage in discussions around media portrayals of gender may foster more flexible gender identities in their children. On the other hand, families with more restrictive communication styles may limit their children's exposure to alternative gender expressions, reinforcing traditional gender roles. The interplay between family communication and digital media exposure can create a dynamic environment where children's gender socialization is constantly evolving (Paus Hasebrink 2019) ^[17].

Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how children develop gender roles through family interactions and media exposure. Theories like Social Learning Theory, Cognitive Development Theory, and Gender Schema Theory illustrate the psychological mechanisms at play, while Family Systems Theory situates these processes within the broader context of family dynamics. The digital media landscape adds complexity to these traditional theories by introducing new forms of gender socialization that are both influenced by and contribute to evolving gender norms.

3.2 Family Communication and Gender Socialization

Parent Child Communication plays a pivotal role in shaping children's gender perceptions and behaviors. Direct communication between parents and children such as verbal discussions, instructions, and feedback often reinforces societal expectations about gender. For instance, parents might encourage children to engage in gender typical behaviors by reinforcing certain toys, activities, or chores that align with traditional gender roles (Kollmayer *et al.* 2018) ^[10]. Studies show that parents who model and reinforce gendered

expectations such as encouraging girls to play with dolls and boys to engage with trucks subconsciously teach children about gender norms. Moreover, parents often subtly communicate expectations through their responses to children's gender expressions, shaping how children understand what is considered acceptable behavior for their gender (Halpern 2016) ^[9]. These early, direct communications provide the foundation for how children learn about gender roles and begin to internalize societal gender expectations. Influence of Siblings is another key factor in gender socialization. Sibling communication, particularly between older and younger siblings, can significantly shape how children perceive and perform gender roles. Older siblings often act as role models for younger children, teaching them about gender appropriate behaviors and helping to reinforce gender norms through their interactions (McHale, Updegraff, & Whiteman, 2012) ^[15]. For example, an older sibling might guide a younger sibling in choosing gendered activities, such as playing certain games or using specific language. Research indicates that the dynamics between siblings can either reinforce or challenge traditional gender roles, depending on the behaviors exhibited by the older sibling and the nature of family interactions (Briella, 2007) ^[5]. In many cases, younger children adopt gendered behaviors and attitudes that are first introduced through their older siblings, whose influence can be more significant than that of peers or even parents in certain developmental stages.

The Role of Extended Family in gender socialization is also important, especially within diverse family structures. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other extended family members often convey gender expectations through their interactions with children. These family members may present additional reinforcement of gender roles or, in some cases, challenge them depending on their cultural beliefs and personal experiences. For instance, in many cultures, grandparents may hold traditional views about gender roles and may communicate those norms to children, either directly or indirectly. Studies have found that extended family members may reinforce or challenge gender expectations through their own behaviors, attitudes, and the ways they interact with children (Zosuls *et al.*, 2011). The influence of extended family can be especially profound in families with more complex or non traditional structures, where gender norms may be communicated differently than in nuclear families. The varying approaches to gender socialization within extended families can thus either reinforce or diversify a child's understanding of gender.

3.3 Impact of Digital Media on Gender Socialization

In today's digital age, digital media plays a significant role in shaping gender socialization, as it exposes children to a vast array of gendered content across different platforms. Digital media ranging from television shows and movies to social media and video games provides children with a broad spectrum of gender representations, some of which reinforce traditional gender norms, while others challenge them. Research has shown that children who are frequently exposed to gendered advertisements, TV shows, and online content often internalize the stereotypical portrayals of masculinity and femininity presented in these media (Levine, 2017). For instance, commercials and cartoons often depict men as strong and dominant and women as nurturing and passive,

reinforcing societal gender roles. However, newer forms of digital content, such as YouTube, video games, and social media platforms, can expose children to more diverse representations of gender, from gender fluid characters to influencers who challenge traditional norms. Studies suggest that exposure to diverse gender representations in media can encourage children to question rigid gender roles and form more fluid, inclusive gender identities (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017) ^[22]. The digital space, thus, acts as both a vehicle for traditional gender socialization and a platform for alternative gender expressions, contributing to a complex landscape of gender identity development.

3.4 Digital Socialization and Its Effects on Gender Identity

The rise of digital platforms has provided children with more exposure to diverse and fluid representations of gender, which challenge traditional binary notions of masculinity and femininity. On platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, children encounter content that showcases non binary, gender fluid, and trans identities, which may not have been as visible in traditional media. This exposure can play a significant role in helping children understand and express gender in more fluid terms (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017) ^[22]. In some cases, these platforms offer a space where children can explore and experiment with gender identities in a less rigid environment. Family communication can either support or challenge this exploration. Families that are open and accepting of diverse gender expressions may encourage children to explore these identities, while more conservative family environments may push back against such representations, reinforcing traditional gender norms (McDermott *et al.*, 2020). The role of parents in discussing and validating these digital portrayals of gender can have a profound impact on how children form their gender identities, either supporting their self expression or limiting their acceptance of non binary gender constructs.

Digital media, including video games, TV shows, and movies, plays a critical role in shaping children's perceptions of gender norms. Many video games, television programs, and movies continue to depict highly gendered characters and reinforce traditional gender roles. For example, video games often portray male characters as strong, dominant figures, while female characters are often presented in passive or secondary roles (Lynch *et al.*, 2016). These portrayals help solidify societal expectations about what behaviors, traits, and interests are "appropriate" for each gender. Children who consume these types of media are exposed to these gender norms, which can influence how they understand their own gender and the roles they are expected to play in society. Families play an important role in moderating this influence by discussing the media their children consume and providing alternative, gender equitable representations of the world (Levine, 2017). For instance, families that encourage children to question stereotypical gender roles in games and media can help promote more inclusive understandings of gender.

Marketing and digital content targeted at specific genders have a profound effect on shaping children's gender expectations and behaviors. Gendered advertisements, toys, and product lines such as those that market dolls exclusively to girls and action figures to boys reinforce the idea that certain objects, behaviors, and aspirations are inherently tied

to one's gender (Meyer, 2019). Digital content, including online ads, promotional videos, and even influencer content, often categorizes children based on their gender and pushes products that align with traditional gender roles. These marketing strategies can influence how children perceive gender expectations and impact the types of products they desire or feel they are supposed to use. The role of family communication in this context is crucial; parents who encourage children to critically engage with gender specific content can help children navigate these messages and form their own understandings of gender that may or may not align with societal norms. For example, when families discuss the commercialized gender representations in toys or ads, they can provide children with a more balanced view of gender identity that isn't solely shaped by marketing (Zosuls *et al.*, 2011).

Challenges in Family Communication Regarding Gender Roles in a Digital Era

One of the significant challenges in family communication about gender roles is the generational gap between parents and children. Parents, often raised in a pre digital age, tend to hold more traditional views on gender roles, while children especially those in the digital native generation are exposed to a broader range of gender representations, including non binary and fluid gender identities. This difference in understanding creates tension and can lead to communication barriers within families. Parents may feel uncomfortable or ill equipped to engage with their children's evolving perceptions of gender, especially when these perceptions are influenced by digital media, where more inclusive and diverse portrayals of gender are widespread (Halpern & Perry 2016)^[9]. For example, children may encounter gender fluid characters on social media platforms, while their parents, often raised in a more binary world, may struggle to comprehend or accept these new identities. The generational divide in gender understanding can cause misunderstandings, leading to difficult conversations about gender roles in the family, where children may feel unsupported or misunderstood in expressing their gender identity (Risman, 2018). Such gaps in understanding often require a reevaluation of traditional parenting approaches and the adoption of more open, fluid, and informed dialogues regarding gender.

Families often face the challenge of balancing traditional values with the progressive views on gender promoted by digital media. While many parents adhere to conservative family values, which are often informed by cultural, religious, or societal norms, children growing up in a digitally connected world are exposed to progressive ideas about gender, such as gender fluidity, non binary identities, and challenges to traditional masculinity and femininity (Levine, 2017). The media, especially digital platforms, provide children with access to diverse gender perspectives, including non conforming and gender expansive identities, which challenge the binary gender norms that many parents grew up with. This often creates a tension within families, as parents may want to uphold traditional gender roles while children are influenced by modern ideas that support more inclusive and flexible notions of gender. Parents might find themselves navigating these contrasting perspectives, often feeling conflicted between respecting cultural traditions and allowing their children the freedom to explore gender

identities outside of societal expectations (Zosuls *et al.*, 2011). This conflict can lead to challenges in family communication, as parents may feel threatened by what they perceive as a shift away from long standing norms, while children may feel restricted in expressing their true gender identities within a more conservative family structure.

In the digital era, parents face significant challenges in mediating gender issues, especially in a landscape filled with overwhelming digital content and online exposure. Children are constantly exposed to gendered content on various platforms social media, video games, advertisements, and TV shows that often reinforce traditional or non inclusive gender norms. At the same time, the internet also offers children exposure to diverse and progressive ideas, such as gender fluidity, non binary identities, and activism surrounding gender equality (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017)^[22]. Parents, who are not always as adept at navigating the complexities of digital media, may find it difficult to keep up with the content their children are consuming. The vastness of digital content and the ease with which children can access it mean that parents have limited control over the gender related messages their children are exposed to. This creates challenges for parental mediation, as parents may struggle to address and discuss gender issues with their children in a meaningful way, especially when the content contradicts the family's values (Levine, 2017). Additionally, parents may be unsure how to frame their discussions about gender in ways that encourage open mindedness without losing their authority or undermining their cultural or religious beliefs. As a result, family communication may become fragmented or strained when it comes to gender socialization, with parents unable to effectively engage with the evolving perspectives their children encounter online.

4. Future Research and Practice

There is a growing need for empirical research that delves deeper into the long term effects of digital media on gender socialization. While several studies have explored how children interact with digital media and its impact on gender identity, there is still a lack of longitudinal studies that track these effects over time. Future research should investigate how exposure to diverse gender representations in digital spaces shapes gender identity and roles as children transition into adolescence and adulthood. Additionally, studies could focus on how different types of digital content, such as social media, video games, and online communities, impact children's perceptions of gender over extended periods. Longitudinal studies will provide valuable insights into the lasting influence of digital media on gender socialization and help identify potential long term outcomes (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017)^[22]. Another important area for exploration is the intersectionality of digital media exposure, examining how factors such as race, class, and culture interact with gender representations online, and how these influences impact children's gender identity development.

In a world increasingly dominated by digital media, parents face the challenge of navigating the complexities of gender socialization in a digital context. To support healthy gender development, parents must take an active role in discussing and engaging with their children's exposure to gendered content. Parents can promote gender equitable development by encouraging open dialogue about gender roles, challenging stereotypical portrayals in digital media, and

fostering critical thinking about the gendered messages children encounter online (Halpern & Perry 2016) ^[9]. It is important for parents to engage in media literacy training, helping children recognize and deconstruct harmful gender stereotypes they may encounter in digital spaces. Parents can also guide their children in exploring a wide range of gender identities and expressions, validating their experiences and creating a safe space for self expression. Furthermore, parents should model inclusive language and behaviors at home, as children are heavily influenced by their immediate family environment in shaping their gender perceptions (Halpern & Perry 2016) ^[9]. By providing consistent and open communication, parents can help children develop a more nuanced understanding of gender in the digital era.

Schools and policymakers can play an essential role in supporting families as they navigate gender socialization in the digital age. Educational institutions should incorporate gender inclusive curricula that address issues of gender fluidity, diversity, and equality, fostering an environment where all students feel respected and valued regardless of their gender identity. Schools can also partner with parents to offer workshops or resources on digital media literacy and gender education, equipping families with the tools to discuss gender roles and expectations critically. Policymakers should consider regulating online content to reduce the proliferation of harmful gender stereotypes and ensure that children have access to diverse and accurate representations of gender. Public policy can encourage the development of media content that reflects a broad spectrum of gender identities, promoting inclusivity and challenging narrow, stereotypical portrayals of gender (Levine, 2017). Additionally, schools could integrate social emotional learning programs that address the emotional and psychological aspects of gender development, helping children process and express their gender identity in a supportive environment.

5. Conclusion

This review highlights the critical role of family communication in shaping children's gender identity and socialization, particularly in the context of the digital world. The digital era presents both challenges and opportunities for gender socialization, with children increasingly exposed to diverse and fluid representations of gender through various online platforms. However, the influence of digital media can be overwhelming, and the generational gaps between parents and children, along with the tension between traditional values and modern gender perspectives, create barriers in family communication. Nevertheless, parents and families can play an active role in fostering healthy gender development by encouraging open dialogue, promoting media literacy, and validating children's diverse gender expressions. Additionally, schools and policymakers can support families in navigating these complexities by offering resources, curricula, and regulations that promote gender inclusivity and digital literacy. Ultimately, family communication remains a foundational element in shaping how children understand and express their gender identity, and by engaging with digital content critically, families can help children develop a healthy and empowering relationship with their gender.

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