DIGITAL HEALTH FUTURES

Insights into young people’s use and opinions of digital health technologies

Summary report from a 2020 U-Report poll
ABOUT U-REPORT

U-Report is a messaging programme for adolescent, youth, and community participation. It’s a key tool to share information, raise awareness, and collect quantifiable data on specific areas that impact children, including the most vulnerable. Responses received are analysed in real-time, mapped, and displayed on a public dashboard.

88% OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH use digital technologies to support their health and well-being.

U-Report allows young people from all over the world to share their views with decision makers.

For more information, visit www.ureport.in
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This report was developed in 2021 by the Secretariat of The Lancet and Financial Times Commission Governing health futures 2030: Growing up in a digital world. The work was supported by Fondation Botnar, CIFF, SDC, UNICEF, and Wellcome Trust.

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Polling: Christopher Brooks, Hira Hafeez ur Rehman, and U-Report offices around the world.


Thanks to the thousands of young people who participated in the poll and generously shared their experiences and opinions.

Executive summary

In October and November 2020, The Lancet and Financial Times Commission *Governing health futures 2030: Growing up in a digital world* collaborated with UNICEF to conduct a global poll with young people on digital health. The Commission wanted to better understand the expectations, demands, and concerns of young people in relation to the use of digital technologies and data for improving their health and well-being.

The poll asked young people to share how they currently use digital technologies for health, and their views on the benefits and risks of digital technologies. Respondents were also invited to share their opinions on what governments and technology companies should do to better govern digital health, as well as what they imagine digital health will look like in 2030.

More than 23,000 children and young people aged 14-35 from 176 countries participated in the poll.

SUMMARY OF SURVEY FINDINGS

- **88% of respondents** use some form of digital technology for health-related purposes.
- Smartphone apps and websites are the most common technologies used.
- **Improving fitness** is the most popular health-related objective for users of digital technologies.
- **Half of respondents** said that accessing health information was the biggest way that digital technologies can help young people manage their health and well-being.
- **Inaccurate health information is the biggest concern** for young people using digital technologies, followed by uncertainties about their privacy and use of digital technologies making them less physically active.
- Young people want governments and technology companies to increase access to the internet and to quality, trustworthy health information. They also want to see stronger regulation of online content and services to protect them from harm and misinformation.
- Young people expressed a high degree of uncertainty about what the future of digital health holds.
YOUNG PEOPLE HIGHLIGHTED SIX MAIN ISSUES that must be addressed by policymakers, technology companies, and other digital health actors:

1. **Reduce the digital divide** so that all young people can benefit from digital technologies.

2. **Improve the availability, accessibility, and quality of online health information.**

3. **Introduce or strengthen regulation and oversight mechanisms for online content and services accessible to young people through websites, smartphones, and social media platforms so that it does not undermine their health, well-being, or other rights.**

4. **Leverage young people’s interest** in their fitness and health. Involve them in finding appropriate ways to maximise the benefits of digital health and to discourage excessive or harmful use of technologies.

5. **Build young people’s trust** in governments and technology companies through involving them at all stages of digital health design, implementation, and governance, as well as demonstrating that young people’s views are being listened to.

6. **Reduce young people’s uncertainty** about digital health and increase their sense of agency by increasing digital health literacy and creating opportunities (both on and offline) for young people to imagine the health futures that they do and don’t want to see.

The Commission has incorporated young people’s views, captured through this poll and other mechanisms, into its report. The Commission will also continue to support the provision of spaces for young people to shape the future of digital health governance so that all young people can flourish in the digital age.

For more information, visit www.governinghealthfutures2030.org
Introduction

Digital technologies—and the data they generate—are being increasingly used by health professionals, policymakers, and individuals around the world to improve health and well-being. The field of digital health includes a growing range of tools and approaches from digital health records, smartphone apps, and video consultations with health workers, to artificial intelligence and virtual reality. Whilst digital transformations offer unprecedented opportunities to expand and enhance healthcare, they also present challenges and risks for young people's health, well-being, and rights.

The Lancet and Financial Times Commission Governing health futures 2030: Growing up in a digital world (the Commission) was established in 2019 to explore the convergence of digital health, artificial intelligence, and other emerging technologies with universal health coverage. The Commission has a special focus on improving the health and well-being of children and has developed a set of recommendations on the governance transformations required to allow all young people to flourish in a digital age.

WHAT DO YOUNG PEOPLE THINK?

Although subjected to a significant digital divide, children, and young people are major users of digital technologies but are under-represented—and often overlooked—when it comes to design and decision-making about digital technologies and digital health.

Since young people stand to inherit the governance models being designed today, the Commission wanted to better understand the expectations, demands, and concerns of young people in relation to the use of digital technologies for improving their health and well-being.

However, evidence and insights into young people's views and experiences in relation to digital health are predominantly limited to high-income countries. To capture a broader range of voices and perspectives, the Commission partnered with UNICEF's Office of Innovation and U-Report to conduct a global survey of young people.
WHAT WE ASKED YOUNG PEOPLE

1. Which of these digital technologies do you use the most for health-related purposes?

2. Which health issue do you mostly use digital technologies for?

3. What is the biggest way that digital technologies can help you manage your health and well-being?

4. How can using digital technologies negatively affect your health and well-being?

5. What should governments & technology companies do to ensure that digital technologies improve the health and well-being of young people?

6. Imagine the world in 2030, how do you think you will use digital technologies to get health information and advice?
HOW INFORMATION WAS GATHERED

In October and November 2020, a poll was distributed through seven national U-Report channels (Argentina, Brazil, France, Guatemala, Myanmar, Serbia, and Zambia) and through the U-Report global channel.

The poll included six questions: four multiple choice questions about respondents’ current use and views of digital technologies for health, and two open free-text questions to capture their opinions and ideas about the present and future.

INTERPRETING THE POLL RESULTS

Poll results were translated into English and analysed by the Commission Secretariat to identify key themes and trends. The results provide rich insights into young people’s experiences and opinions, but it is important to note that responses, and respondents, are not fully representative. For example, the perspectives of individuals without internet access, digital devices, and basic literacy and digital skills will not have been captured. The number of respondents per country varied from 1 to over 5,000. Findings for countries with lower numbers of participants are therefore likely to be less representative.

Not all respondents answered all six questions. The number of questions answered reduced as the poll progressed. The questions tended to solicit a certain type of response that showed more what young people think about digital health, rather than how they experience digital health. The poll was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. The topical nature of issues such as misinformation and trust may therefore have contributed to their prevalence in poll responses.
The poll had a considerable global reach.

23,435 children and young people from 176 countries participated.

Poll respondents by REGION

- Sub-Saharan Africa: 37.2%
- East Asia & Pacific: 30.2%
- Latin America & Caribbean: 14.6%
- Europe & Central Asia: 9.2%
- South Asia: 4.6%
- Middle East & North Africa: 3.9%
- North America: 0.3%
More than half of respondents identified as MALE.

THE MAJORITY of respondents (86%) were aged 29 years or younger.

95% of respondents came from low- and middle-income countries.

Poll respondents by INCOME GROUP

- Low income: 16%
- Lower middle income: 60%
- Upper middle income: 18%
- High income: 6%
Smartphone apps and websites are the most common digital technologies used by young people for health-related purposes.

88% of respondents said that they were using some form of digital technology for health-related purposes. Websites, smartphone apps, and social media are the most commonly used technologies.

**Most commonly used digital technology for health-related purposes, per country**

- Smartphone Apps
- Websites
- Social Media
- Online consultations
- Wearable tracking device
- Other digital tools
- Do not use any
- No response

We asked young people to tell us which, if any, digital health tools they use most to support their health and well-being. **Websites, smartphone apps, and social media are the most commonly used technologies.**

**Most commonly used digital technology for health-related purposes, by gender**

In percent of respondents

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<thead>
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<td>Other digital tools</td>
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<tr>
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**POLL RESULTS**

1. Which digital technologies do you use most for health-related purposes?

We asked young people to tell us which, if any, digital health tools they use most to support their health and well-being. **88% of respondents said that they were using some form of digital technology for health-related purposes.** Websites, smartphone apps, and social media are the most commonly used technologies.

**Most commonly used digital technology for health-related purposes, by gender**

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**Most commonly used digital technology for health-related purposes, per country**

- Smartphone Apps
- Websites
- Social Media
- Online consultations
- Wearable tracking device
- Other digital tools
- Do not use any
- No response

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2. Which health issue do you mostly use digital technologies for?

In countries at all income levels and for all age groups, **improving fitness is by far the most popular health issue for which young people use digital technologies**. Fitness was the most popular response for male and female respondents but, for those identifying with another gender, supporting mental health was the most common use for digital health tools.

**Most common health-related reason for using digital technology, per country**

- **Fitness**
- **Infectious diseases**
- **Mental health**
- **Reproductive health**
- **Other health issues**
- **Nutrition**
- **No response**

Adolescents aged 14-19 and females were more likely to say that they didn’t use any digital tools compared to other age groups and genders.
Most common health-related reason for using digital technology, by gender

In percent of respondents

- Fitness
- Infectious diseases
- Mental Health
- Nutrition
- Other health issues
- Reproductive Health

Female | Male | Other
--- | --- | ---

Most common health-related reason for using digital technology, by age

In percent of respondents

- 14-19
- 20-24
- 25-29
- 30-34

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Smartphone apps are the most popular form of technology used for supporting fitness, whereas websites and social media are more widely used by young people concerned about other health issues such as infectious diseases, nutrition, mental health, and reproductive health.

Which technologies are most commonly used for different health issues?
In percent of respondents

- **Smartphone apps**
- **Websites**
- **Social Media**
- **Online consultations**
- **Wearable tracking device**
- **Do not use any**
- **Other digital tools**

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Smartphone apps are the most popular form of technology used for supporting fitness.
Half of all respondents said that accessing health information was the biggest way that digital technologies can help improve young people’s health and well-being. This was the most popular response for respondents of all genders and ages, and across all country income levels.

Helpfulness of digital technology for health-related purposes, by gender

In percent of respondents

Health Information
Confidential advice
Give or Fund support
Monitor health
Other ways tech can manage health

Female
Male
Other
Helpfulness of digital technology for health-related purposes by age

In percent of respondents

- 14-19
- 20-24
- 25-29
- 30-34
- 35+

- Health Information
- Confidential advice
- Give or Fund support
- Monitor health
- Other ways tech can manage health

POLL RESULTS

How can digital technologies negatively affect your health and well-being?

Inaccurate health information is the biggest worry for young people using digital technologies, followed by concerns about their privacy and use of digital technologies making them less physically active.

Most common concern about digital technologies in each country

- Inaccurate health information
- Lack of privacy
- Don't know
- Stops me from being active
- Being left out
- Damage to my mental health
- Other ways tech affect health
- No response

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Perceived negative effects of using technology, by gender
In percent of respondents

- Inaccurate health information
- Lack of privacy
- Stops me from being active
- Don’t know
- Being left out
- Damage to my mental health
- Other ways tech affects health

Female  | Male  | Other
---|---|---
Inaccurate health information
Lack of privacy
Stops me from being active
Don’t know
Being left out
Damage to my mental health
Other ways tech affects health

Inaccurate health information is the **biggest concern** for users of digital health technologies.

Approximately **15% of respondents** responded that they don’t know what the negative health effects of technology use might be.

Perceived negative effects of using technology, by age
In percent of respondents

- Inaccurate health information
- Lack of privacy
- Stops me from being active
- Don’t know
- Being left out
- Damage to my mental health
- Other ways tech affects health

14-19 | 20-24 | 25-29 | 30-34 | 35+
---|---|---|---|---
Inaccurate health information
Lack of privacy
Stops me from being active
Don’t know
Being left out
Damage to my mental health
Other ways tech affects health
What should governments and technology companies do to ensure that digital technologies improve the health and well-being of young people?

Young people’s recommendations to governments and technology companies focused on improving basic things, such as internet access and the quality of healthcare, rather than on digital tools themselves. Many respondents urged governments and technology companies to mitigate harms associated with the digital environment, such as misinformation and harmful content. Overall, respondents believe stronger governance of digital technologies is required, but they expressed a high degree of cynicism about governments’ commitment to act on young people’s recommendations.

Open responses to this question fall into three broad categories:

1. **Increasing access.** Young people want governments to close the digital divide and make digital services and information more widely accessible.

2. **Improving quality of information and care.** Young people want to know that health information and advice (from the government and other sources) available through digital platforms is accurate and trustworthy. They also want health professionals to be trained to effectively use digital technologies.

3. **Mitigating harms.** Young people would like to see stronger regulation in place to protect their privacy, discourage harmful use of technologies, and restrict exposure to inappropriate content.
When asked to imagine a world in 2030, young people didn’t seem sure how they will use digital technologies to get health information and advice in the future. Responses to this question indicated a high level of uncertainty, with a large number of open-ended responses such as ‘I don’t know’.

Young people tended to be polarised between highly dystopian and utopian imaginaries: with predictions for 2030 ranging from a “robotised” future where “everyone can access the internet” to “it will be chaos!” These extreme opinions are not fictional but are instead extreme expressions of young people’s uncertainty about what the future holds.

Youth imaginaries on what digital health will look like by 2030 revealed a number of themes that are relevant for governing health futures, including:

- Building young people’s trust in health knowledge and governments;
- Increasing health and digital literacy;
- Building basic digital infrastructures;
- Ensuring digital tools complement and do not undermine the importance of face-to-face interactions with health professionals;
- Increasing the quality of internet access and health services;
- Discouraging excessive time online; and
- Shifting towards more personalised models of medicine.
I think that everything will go through digital technology.

I believe that the vast majority of people, although they use digital technologies, are not digitally literate.

We could interact with professionals more easily.

I’d rather trust a real doctor.

Digital technologies would provide us with verified information on foods, products that are good for our health and for our planet.

I think that everything will go through digital technology.

I would love for relationships to be person-to-person instead of using technology as a mediator.

I can’t imagine, I really have no idea...
The results of this poll give us a glimpse into how young people—or at least those young people with digital access—use technologies to support their health and well-being. The results also reveal insights into young people’s hopes, concerns, and expectations about the future of digital health.

Responses to the poll suggest that many young people had not previously reflected on the role that digital technologies do—and could—play in supporting their health and well-being. Further opportunities should therefore be created for young people to critically examine the potential benefits and risks associated with digital transformations in health, and to relay their ideas and concerns to policymakers and technology companies. Ways must be found to capture the perspectives of more diverse groups of young people, including those who cannot participate in online surveys such as U-Report due to insufficient connectivity and other barriers.

Young people highlighted six main issues that must be addressed by policymakers, technology companies, and other digital health actors:

1. **Reduce the digital divide** so that all young people can benefit from digital technologies.
2. **Improve the availability, accessibility, and quality of online health information.**
3. **Introduce or strengthen regulation and oversight** mechanisms for online content and services accessible to young people through websites, smartphones, and social media platforms so that it does not undermine their health, well-being, or other rights.
4. **Leverage young people’s interest** in their fitness and health. Involve them in finding appropriate ways to maximise the benefits of digital health and to discourage excessive or harmful use of technologies.
5. **Build young people’s trust** in governments and technology companies through involving them at all stages of digital health design, implementation, and governance, as well as demonstrating that young people’s views are being listened to.
6. **Reduce young people’s uncertainty** about digital health and increase their sense of agency by increasing digital health literacy and creating opportunities (both on and offline) for young people to imagine the health futures that they do and don’t want to see.

Young people’s voices have informed the Commission’s report and will continue to shape its ongoing work. In collaboration with partners, the Commission will continue to explore the topics raised in the poll through more in-depth focus groups and consultations with young people. Commissioners and members of the newly-established GHFutures2030 Youth Network will share the issues and recommendations raised in the poll with digital health policymakers and push for their implementation.

See page 23 for more information about the Youth Network.
Country snapshots

The following country profiles show the different demographics of respondents within the three countries with the largest numbers of respondents: Brazil, Myanmar, and Zambia. Poll results reinforce the heterogeneity in young people’s use of digital health technologies both within and between countries. Across all three countries, the increased access to health information offered by digital technologies is perceived as both a benefit and risk.

- BRAZIL
- MYANMAR
- ZAMBIA
The majority of Brazilian respondents fell into the 14-19 age group. This may explain why such a large proportion said that they do not use any digital technologies for health. For those using technologies—mainly smartphone apps and websites—improving fitness is the main objective. Health information is believed to be the biggest way that technologies can help manage health and well-being, but respondents have concerns about the accuracy of information and risks to their privacy.

Profile of the 2,079 respondents from Brazil

By Gender:
- Female: 36%
- Male: 64%

By Age:
- 14-19: 17%
- 20-24: 3%
- 25-29: 1%
- 30-34: 3%
- 35+: 3%

Health Issue Most Used:
- Fitness
- Infectious diseases
- Other health issues
- Mental Health
- Nutrition
- Reproductive Health

Biggest Way Digital Technologies Help:
- Health Information
- Give or Fund support
- Confidential advice
- Monitor health
- Other

Health and Well-being:
- Inaccurate health information
- Lack of privacy
- Stops me from being active
- Being left out
- Don’t know
- Damage to my mental health
- Other ways tech affects health
Almost half of respondents from Myanmar were aged 20-24. The most popular digital technology used for health is social media. Only 10% said they don’t use any technologies. Fitness is by far the most common reason for using digital technologies and accessing health information is the biggest way young people in Myanmar think technology can help them manage their health and well-being. More than one in five respondents said they didn’t know about potential negative impacts of digital health.

Which of these digital technologies do you use the MOST for health-related purposes?

- Social Media
- Smartphone Apps
- Websites
- Do not use any
- Online consultations
- Wearable tracking device
- Other digital tools

Which health issue do you mostly use digital technologies for?

- Fitness
- Mental Health
- Infectious diseases
- Other health issues
- Nutrition
- Reproductive Health

What is the biggest way that digital technologies can help manage health and well-being?

- Health Information
- Give or Fund support
- Confidential advice
- Monitor health
- Other

How can using digital technologies negatively affect your health and well-being?

- Don’t know
- Inaccurate health information
- Stops me from being active
- Lack of privacy
- Being left out
- Damage to my mental health
- Other ways tech affects health
The majority of Zambian respondents were aged over 20. Websites are the most popular digital technologies used for health-related purposes. The most common health issue that respondents use digital technologies for is infectious diseases, followed by fitness and reproductive health. Health information was by far the most popular response when asked the biggest way that digital technologies can help health and well-being. The accuracy of health information was also a top concern.

Profile of the 3,386 respondents from Zambia

Which of these digital technologies do you use the MOST for health-related purposes?

Which health issue do you mostly use digital technologies for?

What is the biggest way that digital technologies can help manage health and well-being?

How can using digital technologies negatively affect your health and well-being?
Inaccurate health information is the biggest concern for young people using digital technologies.

Young people expressed a high degree of uncertainty about what the future of digital health holds.

Young people want to see stronger regulation of online content and services to protect them from harm and misinformation.

JOIN THE GHFutures2030 YOUTH NETWORK

The GHFutures2030 Youth Network was launched at the ECOSOC Youth Forum in April 2021. The goal of the Network is to take forward the recommendations of the Governing Health Futures 2030 Commission. Members of the Network will co-create and co-lead future research, advocacy, and dissemination activities to steer positive health futures with and for youth.

All youth who are interested in being part of the ongoing work of the Commission are encouraged to join the Network. To express your interest go to: twtr.to/OvAj