Meeting Youth Where They (Increasingly) Are:

Five Recommendations for Reaching Youth about Contraception and Reproductive Health with Digital Technologies

1. **Apply Best Practices**
2. **Convene the Right Team**
3. **Know that "Content is Queen"**
4. **Expand Content and Channels to Navigate the Digital Divide**
5. **Use Monitoring and Evaluation for Adaptive Management**

Context

Young people, often defined as between ten and up to 29 years old,[1] are quickly becoming the majority of mobile phone users globally.[2] When young people around the world seek information about puberty, sex, and contraception online, it can be difficult for them to access quality, accurate information. This is because of how quickly and how much content is disseminated, varying levels of digital literacy (i.e., the ability to discern accurate from inaccurate information online), the stigma associated with accessing this type of information, and social and gender norms that often limit girls' technology use. Further, what is available digitally—e.g., via websites, social media, and mobile messaging platforms—is often inconsistently accessible due to challenges including unreliable internet connections, or is misinformative and harmful.[3–7]

However, digital health interventions can meet young people in low- and middle income countries (LMICs) where they increasingly are—online—and can impact their family planning and reproductive health (FP/RH) knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors.[3–6] The World Health Organization (WHO) also recommends leveraging digital health interventions to overcome barriers to young people's access to correct and suitable FP/RH information.[8]

Activity Overview

Breakthrough ACTION conducted an assessment to understand how young people in LMICs seek, vet, and share information about contraception and reproductive health using social media, web-based, app-based, and mobile messaging platforms.

The assessment informed five program recommendations about how to best reach young people with accurate, well-packaged information about these topics using digital technologies.

The recommendations are intended for those working in youth FP/RH, who are interested in leveraging digital technologies to enhance their social and behavior change activities' reach and impact.

This document gives an overview of key assessment findings, and the five recommendations. Short videos that explain each recommendation in detail, are available online.

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What This Activity Contributes

This research builds on existing resources and guidance, in particular, WHO's ***Youth-Centered Digital Health Interventions: A Framework for Planning, Developing and Implementing Solutions with and for Young People*** and the ***Principles for Digital Development***. Much of the published research on digital interventions with youth is based on data gathered in high-income countries. This activity focuses on research from LMICs and hones programmatic recommendations to that context.

Methodology

Breakthrough ACTION conducted three assessment activities: a desk review, key informant interviews (KIIs), and an online survey of youth. The desk review, conducted in late 2020, included more than 30 peer-reviewed and gray literature documents, and online resources. The full list of articles reviewed, including some that were published and reviewed after the main desk review concluded, **is available online**. The project used purposive sampling to identify these materials, beginning with the **Youth-Centred Digital Health Interventions Framework**. Based on desk review findings, Breakthrough ACTION created a semi-structured discussion guide and used it to hold interviews with 23 experts from donor, researcher, and implementer backgrounds. Breakthrough ACTION conducted the interviews remotely, in late 2020 and early 2021, using Zoom or Google Meet. With the interviewees' consent, most interviews were recorded and transcribed using Otter software (Otter.ai, Los Altos, CA). Interview notes and transcripts were later synthesized using Dedoose qualitative analysis software (SocioCultural Research Consultants, Los Angeles, CA) to identify common themes.

In late 2021, Breakthrough ACTION created an online survey in Qualtrics XM (Qualtrics, Provo, UT and Seattle, WA) with an intended survey population of youth (15–29) in LMICs. The project

developed this survey based on information from the desk review and KIIs and with guidance from an online survey of youth conducted by Restless Development, which they presented to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's 2020 Switched On forum.[9] The survey launched in French and in English in November 2021 and was promoted through Breakthrough ACTION's social media channels and its program and research team's networks. Breakthrough ACTION offered no incentives for completing the survey. The online survey achieved a sample size of 162 young people.

Description of the Survey Sample

About one-half of respondents were older youth (aged 25–29), and more than one-half of the sample reported living in West Africa, mostly (78%) in cities. Some (20%) lived in a town or village. Two percent lived in a rural area. A majority (61%) of respondents identified as women, 34% as men, and 5% preferred to self-describe or did not specify their gender. Only 2% identified as living with a disability. Thirty-eight percent (38%) reported that they were in a relationship (not married), 27% were single but had been in a romantic relationship before, 15% were dating or in informal relationship(s), 9% were single and had never been in a romantic relationship, and 8% were married. As the sample size was small and comprised mostly urban, older, and educated persons, the survey population should not necessarily be considered representative of youth in West Africa specifically nor in LMICs as a whole.

Key Findings

The desk review, KIIs, and survey results yielded the following key findings:

- In sub-Saharan Africa, more young people (ages 18–29) have "smart" mobile phones than do their older counterparts.[10] However, young people in Africa are still considered the most disconnected in the world, with fewer than 42% of people online.[11] Cost is a key factor: while approximately 2.5 billion people live in countries where the cheapest available smartphone costs 25% or more of the average monthly income, the least affordable devices are in Africa, where a smartphone costs 62.8% of average monthly income.[12]

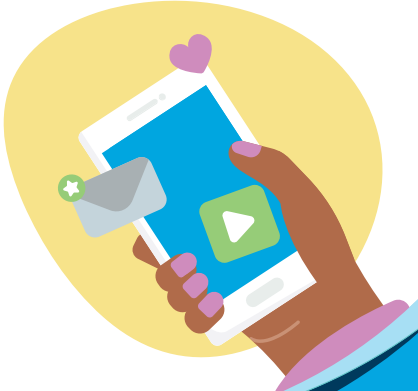
Per the Breakthrough ACTION survey

» Nearly all (98%) of the respondents use a smartphone to access the internet, and a third (35%) also use a laptop. Most (90%) use a private device that they own. Most (80%) go online between five and seven days per week, although all the rural youth in the sample (2%) reported going online only one to two days per week.

» One-quarter (26%) spend more than seven hours/day online, and one-quarter (26%) spend one hour or less/day online. Older youth (25–29) were more likely than younger youth to spend seven or more hours/day online.

» For 65%, the cost of data is the biggest challenge to getting online, and for 15%, it is network issues, relative to their country or region's network. Differences by gender, age, and residence were minimal according to the small sample.

» Three-quarters (76%) reported that when they are online, they spend the most or second-most time on WhatsApp, followed by Facebook (58%). Young men were more likely than young women to spend a lot of their time on Facebook: 77% vs 47%.



- Poor infrastructure and connectivity, high data costs, and gender disparities that favor men's and boys' access to resources and technology impact young people's ability to seek out information digitally.[2,3,5] We found no indication of how the digital divide impacts sexual and gender minority communities.
- Older adolescents in LMICs are more likely to have access to mobile phones, and boys are 1.5 times more likely to own or have access to mobile phones than girls.[4,7] However, several interviewed experts noted that most FP/RH digital interventions are crafted for young women, potentially alienating entire audience segments.
- SMS text message interventions are effective in reaching young people and sharing FP/RH information and can be expanded to increase engagement; many of the key informants emphasized that young people access information about puberty, sex, and contraception on platforms they already use and are less likely to seek it out on separate platforms or take up phone memory downloading new apps.
- In LMICs, young people's digital literacy varies and is critical to the success of digital FP/RH interventions.[13] Because girls and women often have less digital access, their digital literacy is often lower than their male counterparts'.[7]
- Key informants generally agreed that young people work to find trustworthy information by searching for reputable content. For example, depending on the context and audience segment, this might be a website that has a phone number listed, is linked to a trusted nongovernmental organization, or cites an international health organization or national health ministry.
- Key informants agreed that anonymity and confidentiality are important to young people in LMICs when seeking information on reproductive health and contraception. Key informants and program literature showed young people in LMICs prefer to discuss detailed FP information, as well as FP/RH information, in broader contexts, such as sex and romantic relationships.[14–16]
- Young people prefer messaging that is simple, fun, interesting, and less scientific.[3] For example, youth prefer simpler, familiar phrases like "contraceptive" and "boyfriend/girlfriend" over "family planning" and "intimate partner." They also respond well to the use of exclamation marks to convey a brighter tone.[17,18] According to key informants, digital FP/RH interventions performed best when content was representative of and appealed to young people's broader lives and well-being.
- Using human-centered design and youth partnership approaches that fully engage young people—the priority audience—in the planning and design process can improve program success.
- Digital interventions work best when they fit into existing infrastructure, tools, and interventions, including young people's everyday technology habits.[8,19] Many key informants also drew attention to the fact that digital communication is not a "silver bullet" solution, nor is it appropriate for every context.
- Many of those interviewed described how the larger environment—including political and cultural attitudes toward FP/RH education and gender equity, prevalence of pornography, and whether digital spaces are used for education—affects digital FP/RH intervention effectiveness among young people.
- Many key informant interviewees emphasized the importance of linking *online* engagement with youth about contraception to *real-life* contraceptive method service delivery sites. They also highlighted the value of measuring online and offline engagement and behaviors.
- Nearly all interviewed noted methods to measure the "success" of digital FP/RH interventions vary and that much more remains to be done to standardize and document these measures.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Apply Best Practices

Program designers should use established best practices for developing social and behavior change activities related to youth FP/RH and apply those to the digital context. These best practices include: partnering with young people through co-design approaches like human- or youth-centered design, starting with a landscape analysis, conducting careful audience segmentation, creating specific program goals and objectives—and designing monitoring and evaluation efforts accordingly—and continuously refining and adapting based on monitoring data.

Partnering with young people throughout the program design cycle helps ensure that an intervention responds to their actual needs, and also strengthens young people's technical capacities and livelihoods.

Conducting landscape analyses can help program designers better understand the socio-ecological and programmatic context in which they hope to operate. This, together with a careful audience analysis, ensures that a digital intervention is the most effective approach and helps avoid duplication. Landscape analyses also allow program designers to examine factors like digital access, digital literacy, and what platforms are already being used by an intended audience, so implementers can position the intervention appropriately to reach youth, rather than beg youth to come to the intervention.

"There's a lot of duplication in this space, and it's much sexier to build something new. To [build a native app] well and do something to quality, at scale, it's a tremendous amount of work and money. […].Only create a new app if you're providing ***devices*** and ***data*** and are ***less concerned about scale and sustainability***."
—IMPLEMENTER KII

Such assessments and analyses can also help intervention designers set and articulate program goals, such as whether they want to share FP/RH information, establish an online community to share FP/RH experiences, or increase contraceptive uptake. They also help them gauge whether those goals truly can be attained with a standalone online intervention or if the designers need to build channels or linkages to health care systems or partners first. Considering potential linkages and partners and engaging with relevant stakeholders early on contributes to program success and sustainability.

Implementers can enhance and assure quality results by gather monitoring data throughout a program's duration (see Recommendation 5). With many digital programs, real-time data is plentiful, ever-available, and enables nimble program adjustments at any point during an intervention.

"Maybe our program objective is to engage youth online with family planning information and then to connect them with family planning or contraceptive services offline or 'in real life,' at a specific pharmacy or clinic. We can set up our monitoring framework to track referrals and enrollment in clinical services. For example, how many youth came to our online site? What did they do once they were on our site? How many of those online users went on to enroll and receive in-person services at the clinic? How many adopted a contraceptive method?"
—EXCERPT FROM RECOMMENDATION VIDEO 5

Recommendation 2

Convene the Right Team

The intervention's design team should convene people with a range of expertise, including members of the priority youth audience. The program design should integrate capacity-building opportunities for young people to learn skills that are transferable and marketable. The design team should ideally include expertise in the following:

- FP/RH.
- Digital writing and content development.
- Graphic design.
- Moderation of online communities and content.
- Monitoring and evaluation.
- Legal matters, in particular safeguarding minors and managing data.
- Gender and social norms.
- Operations and information technology platform management.
- Marketing/partnerships.

"[You need] …someone who can tell you, 'this is boring.' Hire a creative team that is young, diverse, female—**you need that many perspectives.**" —IMPLEMENTER KII

The "right" team also goes beyond intervention staff and includes developing partnerships with **government, private sector, and local leadership, as well as with gatekeepers or reference groups**. A government's Ministry of Health (or equivalent agency) is often an essential partner, either because they are the intended audience's most trusted source for FP/RH information, or to ensure your program complements relevant national youth FP/RH policies. Or, the Ministry of Health might have an important role as a convener among development sector partners, and play a less visible role for the intended audience. Private sector partners can also be helpful: for example, partnering with a search engine optimization firm can make your content easier to find online; working with a preferred health clinic network can link users directly to preferred contraceptive service provision points.

Recommendation 3

Know that "Content is Queen"

Creators must develop visuals, messages, and other elements that engage and foster trust with the audience. Content should be technically correct *and* responsive to audience interests.

"With digital, you need to make it more interesting than porn…" —FUNDER KII

To achieve this, everything should be presented the way the audience itself communicates, using images to which they can relate. The tone, information, and key messages shared should be encouraging rather than scary, and messages should appeal to the audience's values, priorities, and experiences. Calls to action should encourage viable actions.

Some formats that can work well with young people include storytelling through relatable personas or characters, and user-generated content (defined as texts, videos, images, or reviews created by the audience, rather than by a campaign or brand[20]). One way to develop trust with young people online is to work with known personalities or "influencers" to deliver key information and messages.

"People trust real-life experiences as these can be powerful to dispel rumors."
—IMPLEMENTER KII

Another is to engage with your audience through conversation, which can involve chatbots. However, many campaigns credit the lasting connections they develop with users to having a live person reply to followers' comments, questions, and private messages. Also, chatbots can misinterpret personal disclosures that may need careful, sensitive responses. All of these components are critical to rising above the "noise" of other, often sensational and incorrect, content that competes for an audience's attention.

Breakthrough ACTION survey results

The survey asked about respondents' general online behaviors. Most (60%) reported that they had shared (or tagged someone on) something they had found online within the past week. Only 4% replied they never share things they find online. An article or blog (27%), video or photo (23%), post or tweet (23%) are the formats respondents most commonly shared, followed by a meme (12%) or event invitation (10%).

How people shared content varied: 33% tagged the recipient in the original post, 30% sent them a private message, 19% reposted or re-tweeted it, 10% sent to a group message. Only 5% showed it to someone they were with at the time, and 1% told someone in-person, or via phone or video call.

Survey respondents were asked about the factors that are important to them when they access the internet to find information about bodies, sex, and relationships. They identified most important factor as content which addresses topics of interest: 71% of respondents cited this as their first or second choice. Next most important was that the content is accurate, trustworthy, and reliable (41% selected as their first or second choice). Also important was that the content is accessible for free (15%) and that the space is designed specifically for the respondent's community (e.g., only for people of the respondent's religion or gender, or sexual orientation, or age group) (11%).

"In [social and behavior change], we know it is important not to be 'preachy' with key messages—it needs to be balanced with other content. Developing trust is key, especially online, and true CONTENT—not just FP/RH information—does this."
—IMPLEMENTER KII

Recommendation 4

Expand Content and Channels to Navigate the Digital Divide

"To be honest, I can't think of many platforms out there that specifically target boys, but I can think of quite a few that specifically target girls… but that doesn't solve the problem of these girls not actually having access to the technology or the internet in the first place."
—DONOR KII

Designers need to think critically about whether the audience they are trying to reach is *fully* or just *partially* online or using mobile technologies. They should prepare to use multiple channels if digital access is uneven.

> The "digital divide" refers to the factors separating those who do and do not have access to digital technologies. These factors include internet availability; internet, data, and device affordability; internet quality and speed; device access; and digital literacy.[21]

Globally, boys and young men have greater access to digital activities than girls, yet surprisingly few interventions and platforms are designed to reach them, which is a lost opportunity. Designers should take the "digital divide" into consideration by ensuring online and digital material

1. Includes content and actionable messages for both young men and young women.
2. Is complemented by offline (e.g., mass media, community) activities to ensure the program is reaching its priority audience, especially if they are not online.

3. Works with partners such as the government and internet providers to advocate for more even digital access across urban and rural populations, and across genders (including sexual and gender minorities).

Recommendation 5

Use Monitoring and Evaluation for Adaptive Management

Designers should use monitoring and evaluation data to confirm whether a digital intervention activity is reaching its intended audience(s), to explore who else it might be reaching, and to inform course-corrections to improve priority audience engagement. Useful types of data to monitor include:

- Search engine analytics, to assess how and whether people are finding your content.
- Reach data, to see how many and which people are seeing your content.
- Engagement data, such as organic versus sponsored, time spent on page, links clicked, and number of comments.
- Offline actions taken because of online engagement, such as use of in-person contraceptive services promoted digitally.

"Organizations can undertake various digital interventions to 'nudge' attitudes and behavior of youth on family planning...[including redirecting] search engine traffic towards more reliable information on the topic…"[22]

Much of this monitoring can occur frequently and in real-time, using a digital platform's own analytics, a third-party software (e.g., Sprout Social), or by partnering with the hosting platform (e.g., Facebook) to conduct more in-depth surveys. Designers should use this data to make adaptations to program elements, according to what is working or not working with respect to the program's goals and objectives.

Adaptations can address unintended program effects, such as reaching a different or more diverse audience than originally planned. Reaching unintended audiences may be undesirable—for example, leading to online bullying and harassment—or desirable, offering opportunities to create content for an influencing audience whose attention you've captured, such as parents or partners. While the field has no standard process or set of indicators to measure the success of a digital intervention, designers will benefit from creating a monitoring plan that lets them know, at each step of a user's journey, the extent to which their program is reaching its audience and having the intended effects.

"Through the different stages of our programming, we might zoom into [different] areas more specifically… During a marketing campaign, we might really focus on growing reach. Or at the stage where we're doing content optimization, we'll focus on the impact results, and actually making sure that that content is making a real difference to that outcome that we have in mind. But overall, we need to think about that entire framework. And keep in mind how all the different components are interacting with each other." —IMPLEMENTER KII

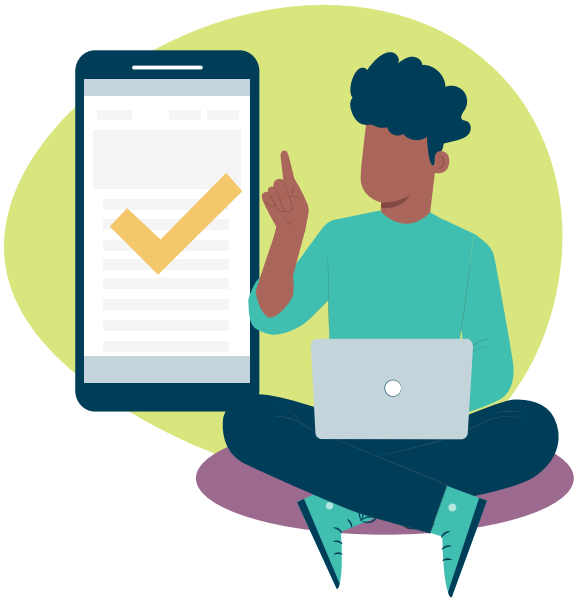
"We conducted, in partnership with Facebook... a survey to see how content could impact our audience's perceptions [about human papillomavirus (HPV)]. The results showed that the more we broadcast extra content in addition to [our series'] episodes, the more we could change the perception of the audience, particularly about the [HPV] vaccine. In the long term, we are looking at other data to see how our … content can impact [reproductive health] product and service use."
—IMPLEMENTER KII

Conclusions

The assessment and the corresponding set of program recommendations contribute to the small but useful body of literature about young people in LMICs using digital technologies to engage with content about reproductive health and contraception. The assessment has several limitations. Most of the program research included here focused on cisgendered youth. Future research should consider more gender identities. The online survey, too, would have been more informative had it achieved a larger sample of youth in LMICs, particularly younger youth and more youth living in rural areas. Time and resource limitations prevented

Breakthrough ACTION from offering any incentive or compensation to complete the survey, offering the survey in more languages, and designing a wider-reaching distribution strategy that would have also included youth under 15 years of age. Future efforts should consider stronger coordination with youth-facing groups for recruitment and offering incentives to participants.

Overall, while "digital" programs can be an exciting and effective way to reach young people with information about their bodies and contraception, interventions must be realized with young people as partners in design, implementation, monitoring, and sustainability to truly remain competitive and relevant. The digital field is constantly changing: new communities surface online every day, platforms come and go, and trending topics change by the second. While this set of recommendations provides some basic guidance on how (and whether) to dive into the digital space and stay spry, the research and evidence base lags behind on truly documenting what digital can—and cannot—achieve to improve youth access to reproductive health and contraceptive information and services in LMICs.



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