

Digital device access could promote health for youth in sub-Saharan Africa

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Access to mobile technology is extremely common in the United States, so much so that it is hard to imagine daily life without it. More than 86% of Americans report using their smartphone as their primary source of

obtaining information. Low- and middle-income countries that do not have easy access to digital media face deficits in receiving information, including knowledge related to health.

A recent study in *Maternal & Child Nutrition* by Dongqing Wang, assistant professor in the Department of Global and Community Health, evaluated the access to [digital media](#) and devices, such as mobile phones, computers, tablets, [social media](#), and the internet, among adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa. Using someone else's phone was the primary source of access. Social media usage was low among all participating countries. The findings suggested the potential use of digital mechanisms to deliver health and nutrition interventions to adolescents. In sub-Saharan countries where access to [digital devices](#) is low, using digital media to disseminate health information may not be feasible or effective, and may place those without access at further disadvantage.

"There is considerable variation in access to digital media and devices across different settings," said Wang. "Limited availability with respect to digital media and devices among adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa presents a challenge for providing digital interventions in this particular setting."

Wang is a strong proponent of overcoming the barriers associated with inaccessible technologies and recognizes the need for further research on how this can be achieved.

"Digital interventions have great potential to contribute to the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals by improving health education and reducing inequalities," said Wang.

Wang's findings are the result of a multi-country, school-based survey in which adolescents ages 10 through 15 self-reported access to digital media and devices. Participants from Burkina Faso, South Africa,

Sudan, Ethiopia, and Tanzania reported rates of [mobile phone](#) ownership ranging from 3-40%, demonstrating the considerable variation in access to digital technology.

The study also reveals key factors that correlate with access to digital media and devices; greater access occurred in wealthier households, homes with high maternal education, and was more prevalent among adolescent boys compared to girls.

More information: Dongqing Wang et al, Access to digital media and devices among adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa: A multicountry, school-based survey, *Maternal & Child Nutrition* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/mcn.13462](#)

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