

Digital citizenship for health: Overcoming challenges for youth

A youth authored statement

May 2025





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Digital Transformations for Health Lab

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The European Year of Digital Citizenship Education, 2025, provides a platform for member states to set common goals, exchange best practices, measure achievements and define a road map for the future (Council of Europe, 2025).

Through expanding digital citizenship education, we have an opportunity to create a generation of informed and active digital citizens for health who have the necessary skills, literacy and resources to actively participate in digital, health and civic spaces for improved health and well-being. This statement encapsulates four key concerns and challenges faced by European youth in 2025 in the context of digital transformations and health. It outlines a series of calls to action that stakeholders must address in partnership with young people in order to advance digital citizenship for health and restore balance between the risks and benefits of digitalization for health.



Introduction

Living in an era of unprecedented digital transformation, as the most connected generation in history, 25 young people living in Europe convened in February 2025¹ to reimagine young people's role in shaping policymaking and the powerful potential of creating a generation of empowered digital citizens for health.

One hundred per cent of participants agree: digital citizenship for health (DC4H) is a relevant approach to addressing challenges faced by young people today by promoting youth agency, literacy and trust². DC4H equips youth with critical skills to shape equitable health systems and ensure their meaningful participation in the digital era.

In 1999, the European Youth Forum put forward a policy relating to young people and social exclusion (European Youth Forum, 1999). We argue that key concerns raised over 25 years ago are still present today, now manifested in digital spaces. Despite calls from young people for a human rights-based approach to health – including strong and inclusive health governance and improved digital skills and education (Governing Health Futures, 2021) – youth remain marginalized figures in key spaces determining their health and well-being. Without the necessary skills, literacy and resources to meaningfully contribute to their health futures, it is not surprising that youth feel particularly excluded in some areas in 2025, including:

- **Digital governance** – structures regulating digital technologies and artificial intelligence (AI)
- **Health innovations** – building inclusive digital health solutions and systems
- **Civic institutions** – engaging in democratic processes that support their desired health futures

With pervasive disparities in digital, health and civic spaces contributing to inequities, poor youth engagement and stifled innovation, it is essential for stakeholders – from decision makers to innovators – to empower youth through collaborative actions that integrate robust literacy, open access and participatory decision-making.

¹ Study Session on Digital citizenship for health: Empowering young people to co-create tools and innovate solutions organized by Digital Transformations for Health Lab (DTH-Lab) in partnership with the Youth Health Organization (YHO) and the Council of Europe Youth Department held on 17–21 February 2025 at the European Youth Centre, Budapest

² Study session final evaluation. 20/20 respondents

Digital citizenship for health

The Lancet and Financial Times Commission on Governing Health Futures 2030's report highlights the interconnections between digital literacy, health literacy and broader democratic and civic literacy skills, arguing that none of these skill sets can be expressed effectively without the other in a digital age (Kickbusch et al., 2021). However, digital, health and civic literacy are often treated as separate entities instead of a comprehensive package, limiting young people's ability to

engage **confidently in society as digital citizens**, particularly those in marginalized groups.

By bringing together digital, health and civic literacy, **digital citizenship for health** provides a framework to pursue governance approaches that increase health equity, enfranchise communities and advance public participation in health and well-being, particularly among young people (DTH-Lab, 2025).

This statement outlines youths' four critical concerns for achieving digital citizenship for health in 2025.

The statement includes strategic calls to action to harness digital innovation while mitigating emerging risks faced by youth, ultimately paving the way for a more inclusive, equitable and resilient digital transformation for health.

While this statement was developed within the European context, it addresses issues that resonate with young people globally. In today's interconnected world, youth are

engaging digitally as global citizens. Although this statement adopts a global perspective, we do not intend to generalize the challenges faced by youth across different regions. It is essential to consider diverse contexts and lived experiences, and to understand how these issues are shaped by the specific realities young people face in their regions.

Key concern: Accessibility and inclusivity

1

If youth cannot access the digital spaces impacting their health and well-being, then how can they develop the necessary skills, literacy or life experience to help shape the system's future?

Digital exclusion, or digital deprivation, remains an important challenge. According to the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), on average, 5.4 per cent of children in Europe are digitally deprived, meaning they live in a household unable to afford digital devices or Internet connection. Differences between European countries are stark, with 23.1 per cent of children from Romania being digitally deprived, compared with only 0.4% per cent of children from Iceland (Ayllón et al., 2023). Digital access and usability are not universally guaranteed, limiting the inclusive nature of digital spaces (Accessible Centre EU, 2023). This remains a core concern for young people wishing to be part of a generation of digital citizens for health, with no one left behind.

Some of the most pressing challenges regarding accessibility and inclusivity in digital spaces include:

- Lack of basic digital infrastructure, such as stable internet and suitable devices
- Lack of diverse health data information, which undermines inclusive digital health solutions
- Lack of culturally and gender sensitive health solutions
- Limited access to digital innovations and digital health platforms due to complicated terms of use, paywalls and complex terminology
- Algorithmic biases

Youth who have internet access are more likely to voice their opinions online rather than offline, making digital spaces essential platforms for youth participation (Eurostat, 2024). Yet, only 23 per cent of European youth used the internet for civic or political participation in 2023, although this usage is seeing a steady rise in recent years (Eurostat, 2024). Increased efforts to make digital spaces more accessible to youth, in all their diversities, can mitigate the existing lack of youth representation in decision-making processes and help foster a sense of shared responsibility and democratic participation (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023).

The EU Youth Report 2024 underscores the impact of youth voices in shaping Europe's digital future, emphasizing their role in promoting inclusivity and accessibility (European Commission, 2025). A value-based approach to digital health transformations, that prioritizes young people's health and well-being, should be regarded as fundamental to improving accessibility and inclusivity in the digital, health and civic domains. Shared values, cultural considerations, diverse community concerns and youth perspectives must be integrated from design to implementation. By promoting active participation in digital, health and civic spaces with an intersectional approach, DC4H has the potential to increase accessibility and inclusivity for young people. In doing so, a generation of digital citizens for health will encompass not only privileged youth, but youth in all their diversities.

Key concern: Digital well-being and online communities

2

Health is digital in today's reality. Maintaining well-being and safety in these digital spaces and balancing real-life and digital engagement should be crucial components of this digitalization. Ensuring young people are recognized as rights holders and have the necessary skills to protect their rights, both online and offline, is essential (The European Parliament, the Council and the Commission, 2023).

Young people are concerned about how digital spaces affect their health holistically, including:

- **Mental health:** There is a potential negative influence on the mental health of users due to digital overload, lack of professional or respectful interactions, feeling overwhelmed by inflated interpersonal conflicts (Pew Research Centre, 2022), non-existent mentorship and an increasing imbalance of online versus offline participation in one's daily life.
- **Physical health:** There is an increasingly sedentary lifestyle among people who participate heavily in digital spaces (Alley et al., 2017). Such a lifestyle has been linked to an increased risk of metabolic syndromes, obesity, cardiovascular disease and musculoskeletal pains.
- **Social or emotional health:** Digital platforms can be unsafe and even harmful to users due to the dehumanisation of basic social interactions and the risk of experiencing social isolation with increased social media usage (Primack et al., 2017).
- **Environmental health:** Digital technologies account for a growing amount of global emissions, an effect exacerbated by AI computing (UN Environment Programme, 2024).

Blanket restrictions on young people's use of digital technologies and online spaces cannot be the solution here and may miss the underlying issue. Instead, preventative measures from both the consumer (literacy and skills) and the producer (regulation and accountability) need to be in place to ensure safe online environments to preserve young peoples' well-being and security (The Lancet Digital Health, 2025).

Interaction in digital spaces can also be highly valuable in fostering community and well-being for young people if used appropriately (Pretorius, 2024). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the world became aware of how online spaces offer a place to connect and form communities. Young people who have grown up as digital natives form social connections online and use these platforms to connect and interact on important issues. For youth with social anxiety, online interactions can feel more psychologically safe, and connection through the Internet can help maintain relationships (Scott et al., 2024). When young people are not as well connected as their peers, they feel left out, just as they would in physical situations. Young people want to embrace their digital surroundings, but equally do not want to abandon face-to-face physical connection.

The beneficial use of these platforms as spaces for active participation and civic engagement must be considered when intervening to balance their negative effects. The European Union, in their Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles for the Digital Decade (2023), emphasizes "putting people at the centre of the digital transformation" (The European Parliament, Council and Commission, 2023). Creativity, genuine connection and time offline are also essential for fostering digital well-being and encouraging young people to become digital citizens for health.

Key concern: Literacy and education

3

For young people to meaningfully participate and contribute to the digital ecosystem, they need literacy and skills in digital, health and civic spaces (Governing Health Futures, 2021).

At both individual and societal levels, digital education, literacy and skills are paramount (Accessible Centre EU, 2023). Despite efforts to improve digital literacy, youth still identify this as one of the most pressing issues they face (Cortesi, 2020) and in Europe, 28 per cent of youth aged 16–29 lack essential digital skills (European Commission, 2025). School-age educational systems and higher education must adapt to the increasing need for basic and subject-specific digital skills targeted at the current generation.

Specific challenges impeding digital literacy among young people and preventing their becoming digital citizens for health include:

- Lack of adequate teaching of digital skills and awareness of the connection between digital spaces and one's health and well-being, particularly among children and adolescents.
- Growing regional divide of digital skills in Europe, with Western European countries reporting higher shares of basic or above basic digital skills in youth per country, compared to Eastern European countries (Eurostat, 2024).
- Current curricula are not well adapted to enable a “digitally mature, enabling & inclusive education”, due to lack of resource availability, low support from leadership and disempowerment of agents of change (Joyce, 2024).
- Young people's voices are represented in less than 1 per cent of adolescent health research today, highlighting the need to improve their engagement in these processes (Partridge et al., 2025).

Youth in STEM or health-related fields require particular digital skills to provide health services in digital first health systems (DTH-Lab, 2024). With over half of European medical students reporting receiving insufficient digital health training, many curricula overlook digital health literacy, leaving the future health workforce unprepared for current and future healthcare challenges (Machleid et al., 2020). Educational programmes leave the future health workforce unprepared to make adequate use of these vital tools through prioritizing theory over practical experience, especially in digital health applications such as telemedicine, electronic health record-keeping and AI diagnostics.

It is important to consider that literacy and skills can be built and strengthened in both non-formal and formal educational spaces: not all learning happens in the classroom. Non-formal education is recognized by the Council of Europe as playing a key role in providing opportunities for young people to acquire skills useful for their social inclusion, personal growth and democratic engagement (European Youth Foundation).

Digital citizenship for health confers the level of health, digital and civic literacy required to shape health policies, as well as the specific skills and education needed to co-create solutions (Masyada & Washington, 2019; WHO, 2024; UNESCO, 2025). As digital citizens for health, youth can be recognized as partners in shaping and co-creating health policy within the digital transformations of health.

Key concern: Trust in a digital age

4

Trust is being strategically eroded in our digital age. From the rise of mis/disinformation affecting public health to the diminished trust in institutions, youth are navigating weakened democracies, poor health outcomes and a general loss of global goodwill.

For the first time in history, an entire generation has been online from an early age, sharing lifestyle practices and health-related information. Information and data storage without accountability, precautionary processes or feedback mechanisms can lead to a rise of data misuse, which is a key concern for young people.

Youth are concerned about digital and data governance. Despite the promise of innovative solutions such as AI tools and Big Data, within the healthcare sector and beyond, there is a growing concern about the shift in power dynamics and the role of the private sector in influencing the health and well-being of our societies. Regulatory frameworks are struggling to keep up with rapid technological advancements, and most vulnerable to these regulatory loopholes are young people. When unchecked power in digital spaces is coupled with poor regulation, profit-driven motivations jeopardize the good health and well-being of communities.

The spread of misinformation and disinformation creates confusion, erodes trust in digital, health and civic spaces and leads to poorly informed decisions. Only 36 per cent of European youth who use the Internet employ fact-checking mechanisms when retrieving information online, highlighting the vulnerability of young people in these spaces (Eurostat, 2024).

Youth face significant concerns related to trust in a digital age:

- Lack of transparency and informed consent over the sensitive data collected.
- Lack of autonomy over patients' sensitive health information.
- Lack of explainability and transparency behind AI-driven diagnostic tools (Norori et al., 2021).
- Lack of support for cybersecurity leading to data vulnerabilities.
- Weakened democratic structures coupled with a rise of private sector influence.
- Poor knowledge of verifying health information.

Youth want strong digital and data governance that ensures their personal data is handled safely so they can participate in digital spaces. Youth want reliable health information from sources they trust. When these concerns are not met, young people are hesitant to engage in digital spaces. Balancing benefits with the mitigation of risks is key to sustainable progress and supporting a generation of digital citizens for health.

Conclusion

In conclusion, youth must be recognized as active partners in shaping the future of digital health and innovations. This is essential in creating inclusive, equitable and transparent digital ecosystems that prioritize privacy, accessibility and well-being.

By fostering collaboration between governments, organizations and young people, we can ensure that digital spaces evolve in ways that reflect the diverse needs of all citizens and promote good health and well-being. Empowering youth with the necessary tools, knowledge and opportunities to engage in digital health governance will pave the way for a healthier, more inclusive society and an innovative digital future.

Calls to action

To address these concerns, youth must be actively engaged as partners and agents of change, not mere participants. We can only achieve the future we want through cooperation and action from all stakeholders.

We call on all stakeholders to:

1. Recognize young people as key partners in promoting digital citizenship for health with an active role in shaping their own health futures.
2. Promote open access to trusted health information and resources that mitigate risks associated with mis/disinformation.
3. Increase efforts for underprivileged youth to participate in digital, health and civic spaces
4. Encourage and provide offline interactions with young people that promote physical, mental health and well-being.
5. Improve youth leadership skills across sectors to participate in decision making processes in governance and civic institutions.
6. Develop government-endorsed digital platforms that provide accurate, fact-checked and trustworthy health information.
7. Mandate rigorous verification protocols and promote the use of youth-friendly language and visuals to enhance understanding and trust.





We call on intergovernmental organizations to:

1. Convene and strengthen multi-sectoral collaboration at the intersection of digital, health and civic domains.
2. Develop and deploy key norms and principles for digital and data governance through strengthened regulations that uphold human and child rights on and offline.
3. Focus on improving young people's mental health and well-being in a digital age by offering programmes, literacy initiatives and policies co-created by youth.



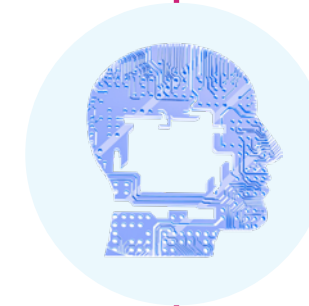
We call on national governments to:

1. Create a whole-of-society approach to improving the mental health and well-being of young people growing up in a digital world by expanding both formal and non-formal education in digital, health and civic spaces for young people.
2. Promote a solidarity-based approach to data collection and use, ensuring equitable benefits and protections.
3. Engage youth in data creation and evaluation, and make participation opportunities transparent and accessible, especially for marginalized youth.
4. Multi-stakeholder collaborations to determine effective and enforceable safeguards during health data collection, storage and transmission, to prevent misuse affecting education, employment and insurance opportunities.



We call on health systems and institutions to:

1. Consider how the health and well-being of young people is affected by everyday life and the direct and indirect ways digital technology affects individual and public health.
2. Embrace the next generation of the health workforce as digital natives and leverage the use of current gold-standard digital health applications in clinical care.
3. Cooperate with a range of stakeholders to promote health data integrity and the use of accessible language when sharing public health communications.



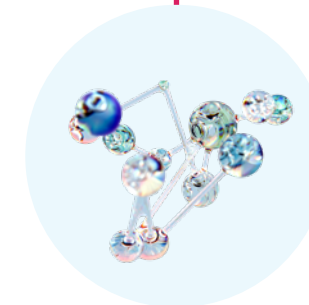
We call on the private sector to:

1. Address youth's concerns around trust and digital well-being by creating health-promoting online communities and trustworthy digital spaces.
2. Partner with the public sector to support young people in safely engaging with AI and digitally powered tools and interfaces.
3. Uphold data integrity by promoting the use of accessible language and data privacy measures.



We call on academic publishers and journals to:

1. Partner with diverse stakeholders to improve the young voices represented in research and scientific publications.
2. Offer alternative financing options to remove barriers to publishing and accessing academic resources, particularly for individuals from low and middle income countries.
3. Promote opportunities and calls for contributions for students and early-career researchers, including those from marginalized backgrounds.



We call on education institutions to:

1. Include digital, health and civic literacy in educational curricula, with a focus on digital wellness, screen time management and mindful technology use.
2. Equip young people with foundational knowledge of AI in healthcare, including how AI tools function, their ethical implications and their role in improving health outcomes.
3. Educate students in healthcare fields and STEM on the intersection of health and technology, to promote digital health literacy among the future workforce.



We call on fellow young people to:

1. Actively engage with existing courses or initiatives that support knowledge building and skills strengthening in the digital, health and civic spaces.
2. Join communities and networks that aim to promote youth voices in the governance of digital, health and civic domains.
3. Advocate for greater representation of diverse youth voices at global and regional level convenings.

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About DTH-Lab

DTH-Lab is a global consortium of partners working to drive implementation of The Lancet and Financial Times Commission on Governing Health Futures 2030's recommendations for value-based digital transformations for health co-created with young people. DTH-Lab operates through a distributive governance model, led by three core partners: Ashoka University (India), DTH-Lab (hosted by the University of Geneva, Switzerland) and PharmAccess (Nigeria).

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