



# Transforming State of the Art Offline Approaches for the Digital World: A Methods Guide for Youth and Well-being Focus Groups

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# Transforming State-of-the-Art Offline Approaches for the Digital World

A METHODS GUIDE FOR YOUTH AND  
WELL-BEING FOCUS GROUPS

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Growing up **2030**  
in a digital world

GOVERNING HEALTH FUTURES  
THE LANCET & FINANCIAL TIMES COMMISSION

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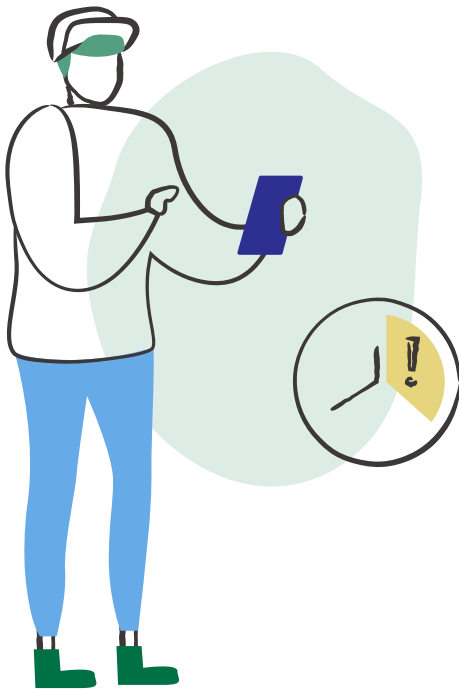


# I. Introduction

Digital technologies are becoming increasingly pervasive in the lives of youth<sup>1</sup>. Particularly against the backdrop of COVID-19, and, for many young people, an increase in the amount of time spent online, there has been a growing debate about the role the digital world may play in youth's health and well-being (Martellozzo, 2020; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020; Rideout, Fox, Peebles, & Robb, 2021; United Nations Children's Fund, 2021).

There are a number of existing frameworks around the notion of well-being, some of which primarily focus on factors such as physical and/or mental health (e.g., Ito, Odgers, & Schueller, 2020; Salam, Das, Lassi, & Bhutta, 2016), and others encompassing a number of dimensions of life, from social interactions to educational experiences (e.g., European Commission, n.d.; Ross et al., 2020).

Many current conceptualizations of well-being – and accompanying policies and/or educational programs – however, are framed from an adult-normative viewpoint, with little to no input from young people themselves. Against this backdrop, the Youth and Media (YaM) team at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society engaged young people across the U.S. in online focus group sessions with the goal to better understand how youth think about well-being and what aspects of their day-to-day lives are most salient to their well-being. We envision that findings from the sessions may help inform the development of educational policies and programs around well-being that are aligned with youth's experiences, needs, and interests.



## II. Purpose of Methods Guide

While the YaM team's findings help shed light on how youth in the U.S. think about and experience well-being, there is a need to better understand the diverse experiences of young people around the world. This methods guide is designed to help enable a range of stakeholders – including academics, governments, and civil society – to replicate YaM's methodological approach in regions around the world, creating pathways to design policies and programs that reflect youth's lived experiences and unique contextual realities.

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<sup>1</sup> People use a variety of terms to refer to youth, such as: "youth," "young people," "minors," "children," "younger children and older children," "preadolescents," "adolescents," "teens," "teenagers," "younger teenagers and older teenagers," and "older youth." We have adopted the convention of referring to all legal minors (generally, individuals under the age of 18 in U.S. law) as "youth." We choose to follow the institutional category of minors because of its common social and legal aspects (e.g., legal adulthood – when parents lose parenting rights and responsibilities regarding the person concerned, most common voting age). For more information, please see Youth and Digital Media: From Credibility to Information Quality.

# III. Eight Guiding Questions

While the specific questions asked during the focus group sessions slightly varied (e.g., some sessions incorporated questions on job opportunities and well-being, and others on civic engagement and well-being), more broadly, each session was guided by the seven key questions below. We envision these framing inquiries as an entry point to develop your own questions in the context of youth and well-being, and/or adapt our team's existing set of questions according to your context (see the full set of questions under "Focus Group Questions").

1. How do youth define "well-being"?

2. From youth's perspective, how is well-being different from or similar to being physically and/or mentally healthy?

3. How have different aspects of young people's lives (e.g., family or friends, school, online spaces such as social media) impacted their emotions (e.g., feelings of happiness, anxiety, frustration)?

4. To what extent, if at all, do the following five areas impact youth's well-being? And to what degree, if at all, does technology play in these five areas in relation to well-being?

People | Communities | Institutions/Spaces | Policies | Contexts

5. To what extent, if at all, do the eight dimensions below shape young people's well-being? Are some areas more important than others, and if so, why or why not?

Physical and mental health | Social interactions | Education/school/skills

Play/hobbies/work | Living conditions | Natural and living environment

Basic rights and opportunities to participate | Economic and physical safety

6. How do youth think the eight areas above could be measured?

7. When young people want to learn about (physical and/or mental) health information online, what platforms, sites, or tools do they use? What types of formats do they prefer to digest this information (e.g., text, video, pictures, memes, infographics)?

8. Imagine it's the year 2030. How do youth think they will learn about health information?

# IV. Focus Group Session Questions

Our team's focus groups were composed of quantitative and qualitative elements.



## QUANTITATIVE COMPONENT

The quantitative component of each focus group session is divided into two sections: 1) Demographics and Emotions Survey, and 2) Digital Technologies and Health Information Survey.

The “Demographics and Emotions” Survey aims to get a sense of participants’ basic demographic information, such as age and level of Internet access. The survey also includes two qualitative questions about participants’ emotions and feelings over the last several months, and how those feelings might relate to different aspects of their lives, such as their friends, school, or communities they are part of. And the “Digital Technologies and Health Information” Survey seeks to better understand the platforms, sites, and tools that participants use to find health information online. This survey also includes several qualitative questions that ask participants why they prefer these sources, and what format(s) they prefer to consume health information online (e.g., memes, videos, text, etc.).

The YaM team also ended each focus group session with an “Additional Thoughts” survey, where participants can add further thoughts and/or indicate if they wish to stay in touch with the team.

To view all quantitative questions, please see the following [document](#).



## QUALITATIVE COMPONENT

The qualitative component of each focus group session is divided into four sections: 1) Icebreaker Activity, 2) Five Spheres of Life, 3) Eight dimensions of Well-being, 4) The Future of Health.

The “Icebreaker Activity” offers a short, engaging question to ideally stimulate a lively discussion and help participants feel comfortable contributing to the session.

The “Five Spheres of Life” segment hopes to better understand how participant’s well-being intersects with five key dimensions of life connected to different people, spaces, and policies (e.g., school, friends, family, COVID-19 restrictions).

“Eight Dimensions of Well-being” seeks to explore how eight distinct areas shape young people’s well-being. These eight areas of well-being have been adapted from the [European Commission’s 8+1 Quality of Life Indicators](#) with the youth population in mind, addressing areas such as the activities youth engage in after school and the extent to which they think their voices are being heard and valued by those important to them

(e.g., family, educators, peers, etc.). This segment also hopes to examine how youth feel these areas should be measured (e.g., should the activities youth engage in be measured by the number of activities they are part of, how much purpose they derive from such activities, and/or the mentorship provided in those activities?).

Finally, “The Future of Health” aims to understand how young people think about the future of health and digital technologies. More specifically, it hopes to get a better sense of how participants envision they will be obtaining health information 10 years from now, the extent to which they will primarily rely on digital or non-digital sources, and what or whom those sources may be (e.g., AI-based mental health chatbots, doctors, family, friends, etc.)

To see all qualitative questions, please refer to the following [document](#).

To see how we sequenced the quantitative and qualitative elements over the course of a session, please see this sample [slide deck](#).

# V. Six Considerations

## 1 Translation of the study

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## 2 Video recording the session

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## 3 Session size

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## 4 Fun icebreaker

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## 5 Spacing out the surveys

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## 6 Things to be mindful of when working with youth

### 1. Translation of the study

An important part of the study is to understand what the concept, and with it, the term “well-being” means to different people. However, when engaging in a global mapping of well-being concepts, we discovered that in some regions synonyms for well-being seemed more common. Examples include “good life”, Ubuntu, “quality of life.” The difference might be explained in terms of language (i.e., there is no literal translation for the word “well-being”) or narrative (e.g., some regions may emphasize health, while others may emphasize life). As such, it’s important to consider your local and contextual realities in how you translate the questions you pose and the way you frame your findings and outputs.

### 2. Video recording the session

Whether you are conducting focus groups virtually or in person, we recommend video recording the session for transcription, future consultation, and verification of data. In our experience, videotaping interviews has proven key for analyzing youth focus groups, as transcribers find it extremely difficult to identify who is speaking and how often from an audio recording alone – particularly in mixed-gender focus groups. Moreover, it is challenging to capture nonverbal cues and other forms of subtle participant engagement without video recordings. As such, video recording allows you to avoid gaps in the data that could otherwise impair findings.

### 3. Session size

Our team experimented running sessions with different sizes of participants, ranging from twenty to two youth. In larger groups of twenty, we engaged in a mixture of larger-group discussion and small-group breakouts.

In our experience, a smaller size allowed for a much more engaging and lively discussion. We noticed that in smaller groups, participants tended to more often turn their video cameras on, which we believe greatly contributed to youth’s participation during the session.

If you intend to work with larger groups of youth – particularly if you are holding virtual (vs. in-person) focus groups – it may be helpful to begin the session with an icebreaker activity (see below) that encourages youth to turn their cameras on (e.g., asking youth to each do a “wave” motion).



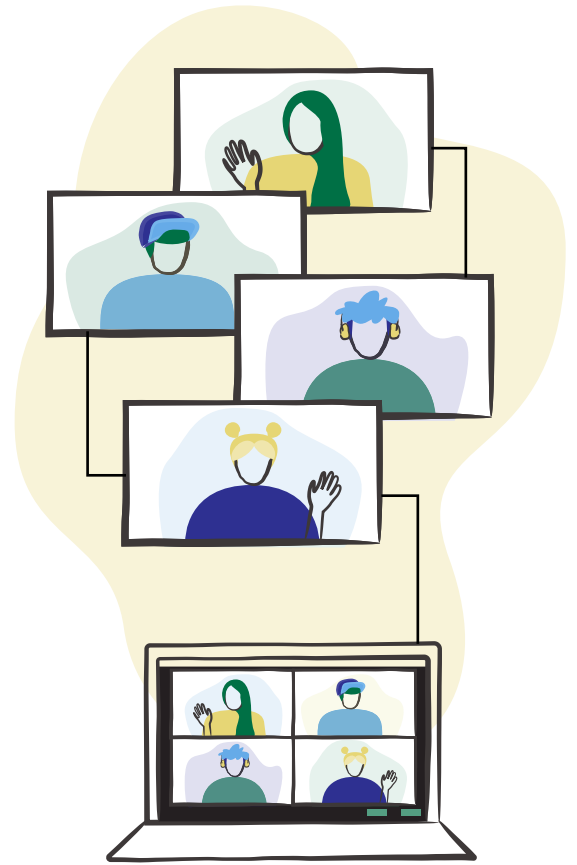
Whether working with smaller or larger groups of participants, we suggest having at least two facilitators. In groups of more than twenty participants, youth may benefit from having three or more facilitators, including one person to be in charge of session logistics (e.g., if conducting the session virtually, sharing links to surveys over chat, creating breakout rooms, etc.).

#### 4. Fun icebreaker!

Particularly in larger groups of youth where it may be more difficult to sustain all participants' attention, we found it helpful to start the session off with a fun and engaging icebreaker activity. We provide possible icebreaker questions in the "Qualitative Questions" document. Ideally, the icebreaker portion should take no more than five minutes to allow adequate time for the remainder of the questions.

#### 5. Spacing out the surveys

We found it helpful to distribute surveys throughout the session to avoid participant dropout and sustain participants' attention. By way of example, we spaced our two surveys at least a half hour apart: we administered one survey collecting basic demographic information at the start of the session, and a second survey about digital technologies and health information towards the end of it.



#### 6. Things to be mindful of when working with youth

Involve youth in the research process. While we hope we have provided you with a basis to start the study, you may want to think through the different opportunities you may have to ensure that youth across contexts and backgrounds have opportunities to be active contributors in the research process. This may include involving youth in making sure study items are relevant for the local context, to co-interviewing partners, to documenting and visualizing findings

Ensure participants and parents feel comfortable being part of the study. Prior to the session, it's important to obtain informed consent from participants and their parents. For parents, a consent form may include several sections detailing i) participation and withdrawal procedures (e.g., that youth's participation is completely voluntary and that they may withdraw at any time), ii) the purpose of the research, iii) what participants will do during the session, iv) time required, v) the location of the focus groups, vi) the risks and benefits, vii) alternatives (e.g., that participants may choose to withdraw from the session with penalty), viii) confidentiality measures, and ix) how to contact the researchers and whom to contact about complaints. Please see a sample parent consent form [here](#).

For youth participants, an informed consent form would ideally present the same nine sections as a parental consent form, with modified language.

Consider what you're giving back. When approaching various schools or youth-serving organizations to recruit participants, it's helpful to provide possible options in terms of how you might give back after holding the focus group session.

Some options that our YaM team proposes include:

- 1 **Working with students in a one-hour session to co-create a learning activity that addresses some aspect of the digital world.**

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- 2 **Delivering a talk to youth about the challenges and opportunities of an academic career.**

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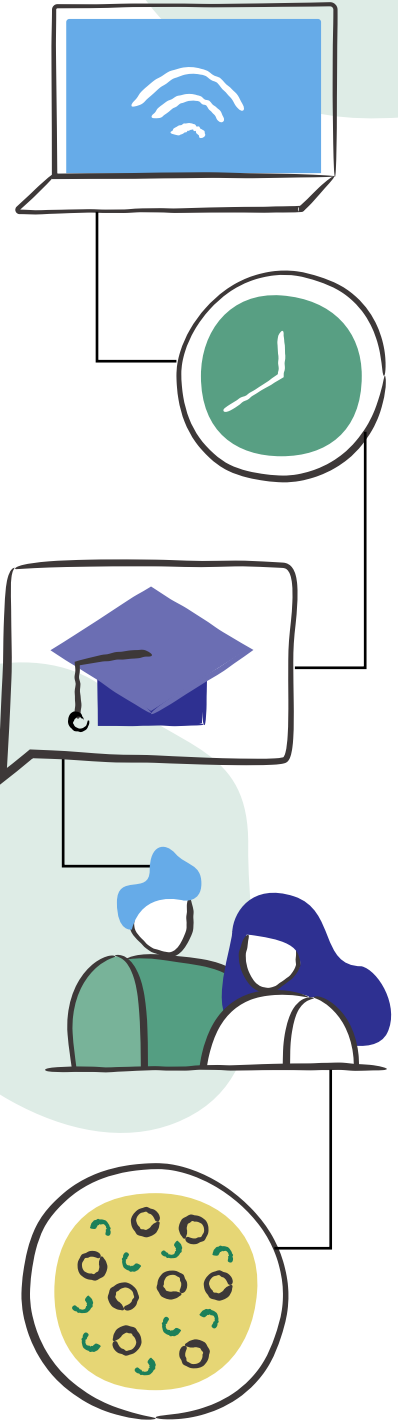
- 3 **Providing support in hosting a parents' meeting to speak about what we know from research in terms of how students engage with digital technologies.**

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- 4 **Other options could include distilling key focus group findings into actionable items for school/organizational leaders (while maintaining participants' anonymity), or hosting a "surprise lunch" for youth.**

You might be interested in more long-term engagement with participants. In terms of youth engagement more broadly, our team conducted a [global online youth consultation](#), in collaboration with the International Telecommunication Union, to better understand what forms of youth participation young people find most valuable (Cortesi, Gasser, Hasse, Maddens, Malik, & Malik, 2020). Youth expressed particular interest in programs that provide long-term sustained mentorship around career pathways.

In this vein, one option may be to cultivate a space for youth to meet with your team members on a regular basis (virtually or in person) to talk about aspects of the digital world they're interested in (including potential career pathways of interest), creating opportunities for mutual learning and knowledge exchange.<sup>2</sup>



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<sup>2</sup> To learn more about different models of youth participation, please see the report Youth Participation in a Digital World: Designing and Implementing Spaces, Programs, and Methodologies (Cortesi, Hasse, & Gasser, 2021).

## VI. Connect with Us

If you would like support in planning your focus groups or might be interested in translating the documents into another language, please let us know by sending an email to Youth and Media (Sandra Cortesi) at [youthandmedia@cyber.harvard.edu](mailto:youthandmedia@cyber.harvard.edu) and/or to the The Lancet & Financial Times Commission Governing health futures 2030: Growing up in a digital world (Secretariat) at [governinghealthfutures2030@graduateinstitute.ch](mailto:governinghealthfutures2030@graduateinstitute.ch).

We look forward to hearing from you and are delighted to support you in advancing research on youth well-being. Collectively, we can support youth to thrive in our digitally connected society.

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