RESEARCH BRIEF

VANUATU YOUTH DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT DURING COVID-19
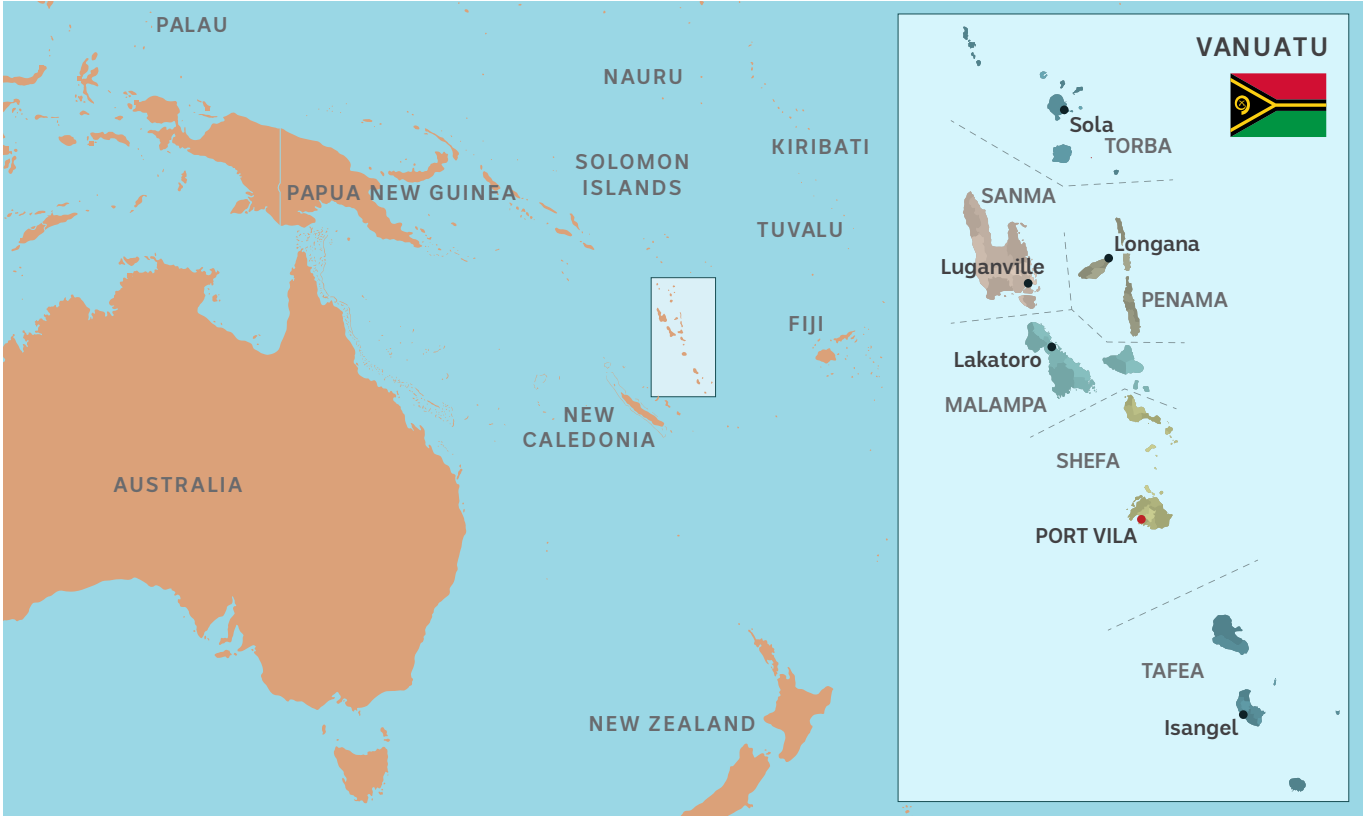
PALAU

NAURU

SOLOMON ISLANDS

KIRIBATI

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

TUVALU

FIJI

NEW CALEDONIA

AUSTRALIA

NEW ZEALAND

VANUATU

Sola
TORBA

SANMA

Longana

Luganville

PENAMA

Lakatoro

MALAMPA

SHEFA

PORT VILA

TAFEA

Isangel

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GO! participants in Vanuatu during the Youth Digital Co-design Workshop in 2021. Image credit: Sista Vanuatu

The GO! project

This research was conducted as part of the Girls Online (GO!) Project, supported by the Australian Cyber and Critical Tech Cooperation Program. The Project aims to empower young women to engage online safely and meaningfully.

The Project involves young women in Tonga and Vanuatu identifying online issues and exploring environmental factors to understand key issues for their peer group. The same young women then design solutions to those issues, taking environmental factors into consideration, and working with media professionals to bring their ideas to life.

The key goal of the GO! project is to enable young women and girls in Tonga and Vanuatu to participate in cyberspace safely and purposefully. This research supports the subsidiary goal of community-wide understanding of how cyber hazards impact young women's digital engagement in a COVID-19 context.

Young women and girls in Tonga and Vanuatu can participate in cyberspace safely and purposefully

Young women and girls have increased skills and confidence to engage online

Community-wide understanding of how cyber hazards impact young women's digital engagement in a COVID-19 context

Improved understanding and response to cyber hazards faced by young women and girls among stakeholders

The GO! project has been implemented in Tonga and Vanuatu. The research findings below relate to Vanuatu only. A similar study is being undertaken in Tonga.

Youth of Vanuatu. Image credit: Adobe Stock

Vanuatu Campaign

In Vanuatu, the GO! project produced a digital and print campaign to share the messaging designed by young women. The campaign, comprising 3 videos and a booklet designed by young women, was officially launched on 7 February 2022. All attending stakeholders received a copy of the booklet and the 3 films (on USB drives).

The event was covered in the Vanuatu Daily Post (in print and online), on Sista's website and on social media platforms, including CARE and Sista Facebook pages. The Daily Post print story on 8 February 2022 is estimated to have exposure of 2500 people.

The campaign materials were released online over twelve days on the Sista Facebook Page and website. The reach figures below reflect the engagement with the campaign videos over the course of the campaign (8-20 February).

Video	Theme	Reach	Link clicks	Likes	Comments	Shares
Video 1 – "No spoelem naraman onlaen"	Cyber bullying	89,816	35,819	2065	101	196
Video 2 – "Tingting gud bifo yu post"	Image-based abuse	61,950	10,974	1190	66	157
Video 3 – "Ino blong yu"	Lack of online protection	59,677	13,122	731	27	28
Total		211,443	59,915	3986	194	381

Reach figures were recorded from the Sista Facebook Page, up to 20 February 2022

The films were also shown on the Vanuatu Broadcasting and Television Corporation (VBTC) from 2 to 9 May before the national news, exposing up to 5000 people to the videos. The Vanuatu Police Force (VPF) shared the posts featuring the films on their Facebook page.

Campaign materials and roll-out plans were shared with the Vanuatu Police Force, the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET), Office of the Government Chief Information Officer (OGIO) and the Vanuatu Internet Governance Forum (VIGF). The materials will be integrated into outreach in school, communities, and police across the country. The materials were also integrated into CARE's Gender Equality Programs, alongside a training session.

The materials were further shared with local organisations, including Vanuatu Women's Centre, the Department of Women's Affairs, and Mindcare (mental health support).

Reception of the materials was positive from stakeholders and audiences:

> *"The Girls Online cybersafety resources are really an excellent tool for the advocacy and awareness on cybersafety...it will inform students to be ethical when they are online."*
>
> **Vanuatu MoET representative**

> *The videos and booklet are educational and interesting. I believe that by integrating this, we will amplify the messages going forward in our work with girls and women"*
>
> **CARE Gender Equity staff member**

> *"Thank you for raising awareness about cyber safety, we learnt a lot and love what you are doing with GO! Cyber."*
>
> **audience member, via Facebook**

Research Background

This research was commissioned by ABC International Development (ABCID) and carried out by Human Capacity Development International (HCDI), a Vanuatu-based NGO. In June, HCDI undertook research entitled '**The Youth Digital Engagement during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Vanuatu'**. The research aimed to uncover if and how the COVID-19 Pandemic affected young people's digital and online behaviours in Vanuatu. Insights from this research will support the project through providing a picture of the unique context in which the campaign was launched and supporting the accurate and nuanced assessment of its impact. The study reached 187 young people, aged 18-29 years. It included on online survey, follow up phone interviews, and focus group discussions.

Due to the threat of the COVID-19 Pandemic, Vanuatu closed its borders on 20 March, 2020, and declared a State of Emergency shortly after (26 March, 2020). National prevention measures succeeded for almost 2 years. However, in February 2022, the virus spread across the community, prompting lockdowns and curfews. The research was carried out in June of 2022, immediately following the February 2022 community outbreak of COVID-19 in Vanuatu and the resulting lockdowns.


Focus Group Participants from the University of the South Pacific (USP). Image credit: HCDI

Methodology

The research focused on assessing cyber behaviours within the ecosystem of psychosocial, health, education, and vocational COVID-19 impacts. The study was carried out in June and July of 2022, immediately following the February 2022 community outbreak, and resulting lockdowns.

For this research we collected qualitative and quantitative data, using the following methodology:

Desk research   **Survey**   **In-depth interviews**   **Focus group discussions**
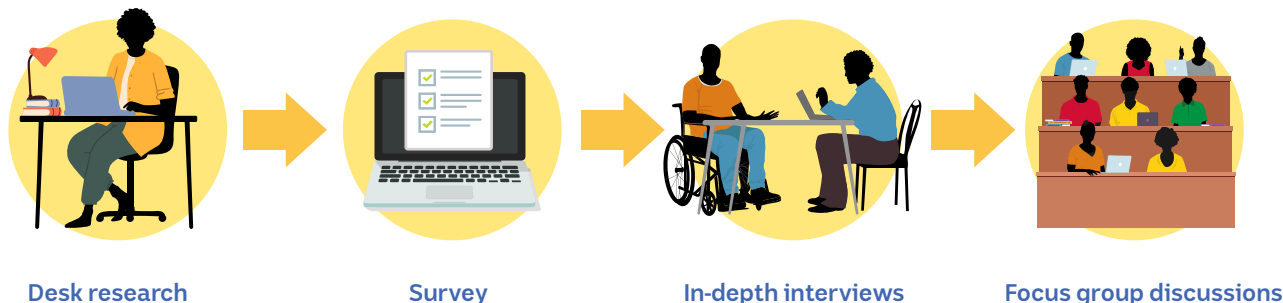
1. **Desk research**, including the ABCID preliminary literature review, the Sista GO! Cyber study, and relevant materials related to the Vanuatu COVID-19 experience, and general studies related to youth cyber engagement.

2. **E-surveys** – an initial e-survey was developed and distributed through the various Facebook and other social media sites popular with young people in Vanuatu.

3. **In-depth interviews** were carried out in-person and over the phone. Interviewers were selected and trained to interview 25 young people each, using the e-survey questions.

4. **Focus group interviews** were carried out at 4 tertiary education institutions: National University of Vanuatu, Malapoa College, University of the South Pacific, and Vanuatu Institute of Technology.

Language
The e-survey and all interviews and discussions were carried out in Bislama. The e-survey, phone questions, and responses were all translated from Bislama into English for the purpose of this report.

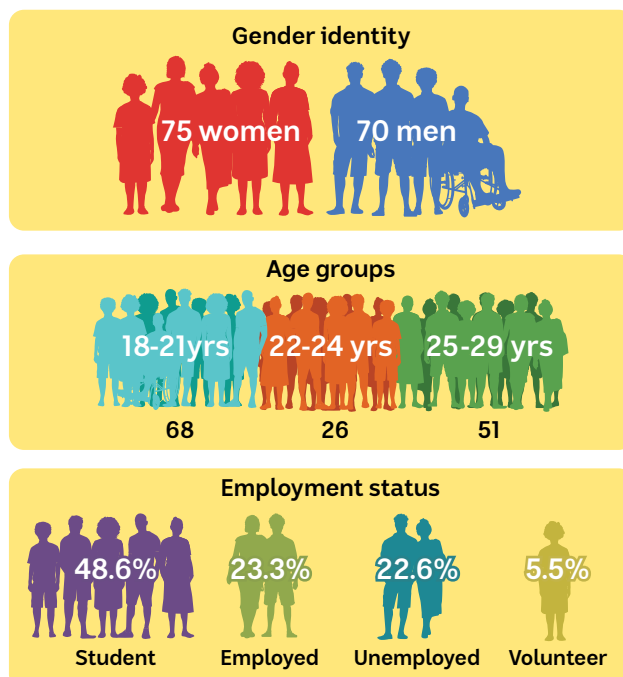As an incentive, respondents were entered into a pool to win one of four 2,500 vatu phone credits.

Respondent profile
All respondent groups were gender balanced and included 3 different age groups, ranging from a minimum age of 18 to a maximum age of 29.

With regard to gender, 51 % were female and 48% were male. There were no respondents who indicated being gender diverse.

Of the 147 respondents, 68 (46.26%) were 18 to 22 years old, 26 (17.69%) were between 22 and 24 years, and 51 (34.69%) were between 25 to 29 years.

Most of the respondents (48.6%) were students or employed (23.3%). The others were unemployed (22.6%) or engaging in voluntary work (5.5%).

Gender identity

75 women   70 men

Age groups

18-21yrs   22-24 yrs   25-29 yrs

68   26   51

Employment status

48.6%   23.3%   22.6%   5.5%

Student   Employed   Unemployed   Volunteer

Respondent location

VANUATU

Other - **3**
No response - **3**

Luganville -**1**

Port Vila - **119**   *Efate* - **13**

Lenakel - **5**   *Rural Tanna* - **3**

Online engagement

As of February 2021, there were reportedly 104,100 internet users in Vanuatu. The number of internet users in Vanuatu increased by 26,000 (+33%) between 2020 and 2021, and overall internet penetration reached 33.5%

80% of young people connect to the internet using their mobile phones

Facebook was the most frequently used site, regularly accessed by **96%**
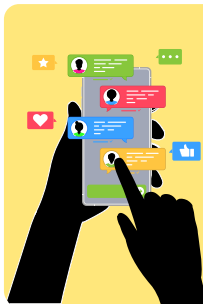
41% said they spend **2 to 3 hours** daily online but **45%** said they spent much more than that, ranging from 4 to more than 7 hours a day

They go online most often for social reasons, followed by news and media updates

Daily internet engagement

0-1 hr	2-3 hrs	4-5 hrs	6-7 hrs	7+ hrs
12.24%	41.5%	14.97%	4.76%	23.81%

No response, 2.72%

Study respondents at Malapoa College. Image credit: HCDI

Key insights

Broad impacts:

- Schools in Vanuatu were closed for about 4 months in 2020 and again for 5 months – beginning in Efate – following the first community outbreak in February 2022. **94% of students reported being negatively impacted by school closures**.

> *"Being stuck in the house and not being able to see friends made me feel very bored"*

- 90% of respondents felt increased financial stress due to the Pandemic and/or preventative measures. Job loss, money spent on phone and data credit added to financial stress

- 81% spent less time with family and friends during the COVID-19 outbreak. Men (87%) and the older cohort (90%) were more likely to report reduced in-person contact

- Almost half reported that the COVID -19 lockdown impacted their mental health negatively. Key stressors included home schooling, online learning, and finances, along with feelings of isolation, loneliness, fear, worry, and confusion

> *"I feel lonely because our culture is based on community and social interaction. COVID- 19 had caused loneliness, stress, and financial stress. Lockdown has caused a lot of issues in the level of community"*

> *"It made me spent more times lonely, I felt homeless like no friends and families"*

Focus Group Participants from the National University of Vanuatu (NUV). Image credit: HCDI

**Impacts on digital engagement:**

- 65% said the Pandemic directly changed their online behaviour, attitudes, or experience.

- More than 1 in 5 (21%) experienced online peer pressure, more than 1 in 10 (11%) experienced online bullying.

- Almost 2/3rds (64%) said their online experience during the COVID-19 outbreak was stressful. Men were twice as likely to rate it as "very stressful" as women.

- Technology and digital spaces provided relief as well as additional stress:

Pros:

- social platforms compensated for reduced face-to-face interaction

  "COVID has made me feel depressed and lonely but engaging with online activities and communicating with families and friends makes me feel happier and not feeling depressed and lonely anymore"

- official information and updates were delivered digitally

- technology was used to share information, especially to family on other islands

- opportunity to increase ICT skills and learn new modes of engagement

Cons:

- Online bullying and peer pressure

- Social media distracted from online learning

- Misinformation was rife across social media

  "Some information – especially on social media - is fake and can mislead people."

- Increased internet access put financial strain on individuals and families
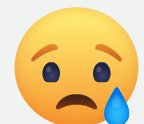
Study respondents at the Vanuatu Institute of Technology (VIT). Image credit: HCDI

Misinformation

Almost 99% of respondents claimed that online engagement was a good way to receive accurate and reliable information about COVID, COVID-symptoms, COVID vaccinations, government reports on the spread of COVID.

"You must get information from the trusted sources like WHO, VBTC, News."

"There is a lot of fake information about COVID-19 going around in the different sources of information but I only trust information that comes from WHO, VBTC, radio, and newspapers"

"Some information – especially on social media - is fake and can mislead people."

However, some respondents indicated that sources were hard to verify on social media:

"We get information, but we do not know if this is the right information or where it comes from. Most confusing information come from social media and fake news on Facebook. Is the vaccine really effective to fight COVID? Are the deaths really caused by COVID or other factors? Some ordinary people only share fake news online."

Mental Health

- 98% said COVID-19 impacted their mental health. Common feelings included loneliness, boredom, hopelessness, anger, depression, and uselessness:

"It made me feel bored because I was growing up with friends and families but in times of COVID I felt lonely and sad."

- To cope with these feelings, respondents used strategies including focussing on exercise, spending time outdoors, social interaction, engaging in hobbies, and spending time online

Boys walking home from school, Tanna island, Vanuatu. Image credit: Katya Tsvetkovas.

More information:

- Learn more about the GO! project

- Access the GO! Vanuatu campaign booklet and videos

Acknowledgements