



RESEARCH BRIEF

TONGA YOUTH DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT DURING COVID-19



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Tutu on the Beach filming the PuaTonga talk show for the GO! Project. Image credit: Tutu on the Beach.

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 Tonga only. A similar study was undertaken in Vanuatu, you can see the results in the [Vanuatu Youth Engagement During Covid 19 Research Brief](#).

Impact – Tonga campaign

Video	Theme/issue	Reach	Reactions	Comments	Shares
Segment 1 – “Cyberbullying in Tonga”	Cyber bullying	22,453	825	125	100
Segment 2 – “Let’s Talk”	Encouraging discourse	21,544	497	69	55
Segment 3 – “Make Your Own Decision”	Tackling peer pressure	16,213	270	7	26
Segment 4 – “Right Choices Online”	Image based abuse	21,873	438	35	45
Segment 5 – “What Do You Share Online”	Critical thinking	20,190	310	6	27
Segment 6 – “Closing”	Summary of learnings	8,339	162	2	9
Total		110,612	2,502	244	262

As part of the GO! Project, a campaign was launched to spread awareness and encourage young women in Tonga to talk about their experiences. The campaign included 6 videos – shared on the Tutu on the Beach Facebook page and rebroadcast as audio on 88.6fm.


“Wow, amazing talk show & very educational. I wish I knew about cyber bullying when I grow [sic] up so to all the growing generation in Tonga. You guys are so lucky. For me, yes this form of bullying is done so many times in Tonga. No good comes from it. It affects the person being bullied mentally & emotionally. I hope with this new program, people will be educated & able to deal with it when it happens to them. Sending love.”

Response to GO! campaign video




Puatonga talk show filming with GO! participants. Image credit: Tutu on the Beach


Latest videos



Hey everyone we are excited to share the 3rd installment of Puatonga Go!...
16 weeks ago · 14.5K views
206



PUATONGA GO! Talkshow: “Let’s Talk”
17 weeks ago · 10.4K views
Bryce Ayoso - Escrow Officer and 350 others



Puatonga GO! Talkshow: What is Cyber bullying?
18 weeks ago · 12.8K views
Tutu on the Beach, Hon. Frederica Tuita a



TTI School of Information Technology Student Researchers participate in 3-day training for the Tongan youths' digital engagement during COVID-19 and Volcanic Eruption research project. Image credit:Tupou Tertiary Institute (TTI).

Research background

This research was commissioned by ABC International Development (ABCID) and carried out by Tupou Tertiary Institute (TTI). In September, TTI undertook research entitled “Tongan Youths’ Digital Engagement during COVID-19 & 2022 Volcanic Eruption”. The research aimed to uncover if and how COVID-19 Pandemic and 2022 natural disasters affected young people’s digital and online behaviours in Tonga. 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 80 young people, aged 18-29 years. It included an online survey, follow up phone interviews, and focus group discussions.

On 15 January 2022, the Kingdom of Tonga was hit by the Hunga Tonga Hunga Ha’apai Volcanic Eruption which led to a nationwide Tsunami devastating low lying areas all over the Kingdom. While in the middle of recovery, Tonga had its first community transmission of COVID-19. In February, Tonga was put under lockdown for three months. The research was carried out in September of 2022, following the recovery and lockdowns.

Methodology

The research focused on assessing cyber behaviours within the ecosystem of psychosocial, health, education, and vocational COVID-19 impacts.

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



Face-to-face survey

TTI Research and Training Centre staff team trained ten students from TTI’s School of Information Technology who conducted eighty surveys.



Follow-up interviews with twenty participants

Language

To ensure optimal access and communication, the survey and all interviews and discussions were carried out in the Tongan language.

Respondent Profile

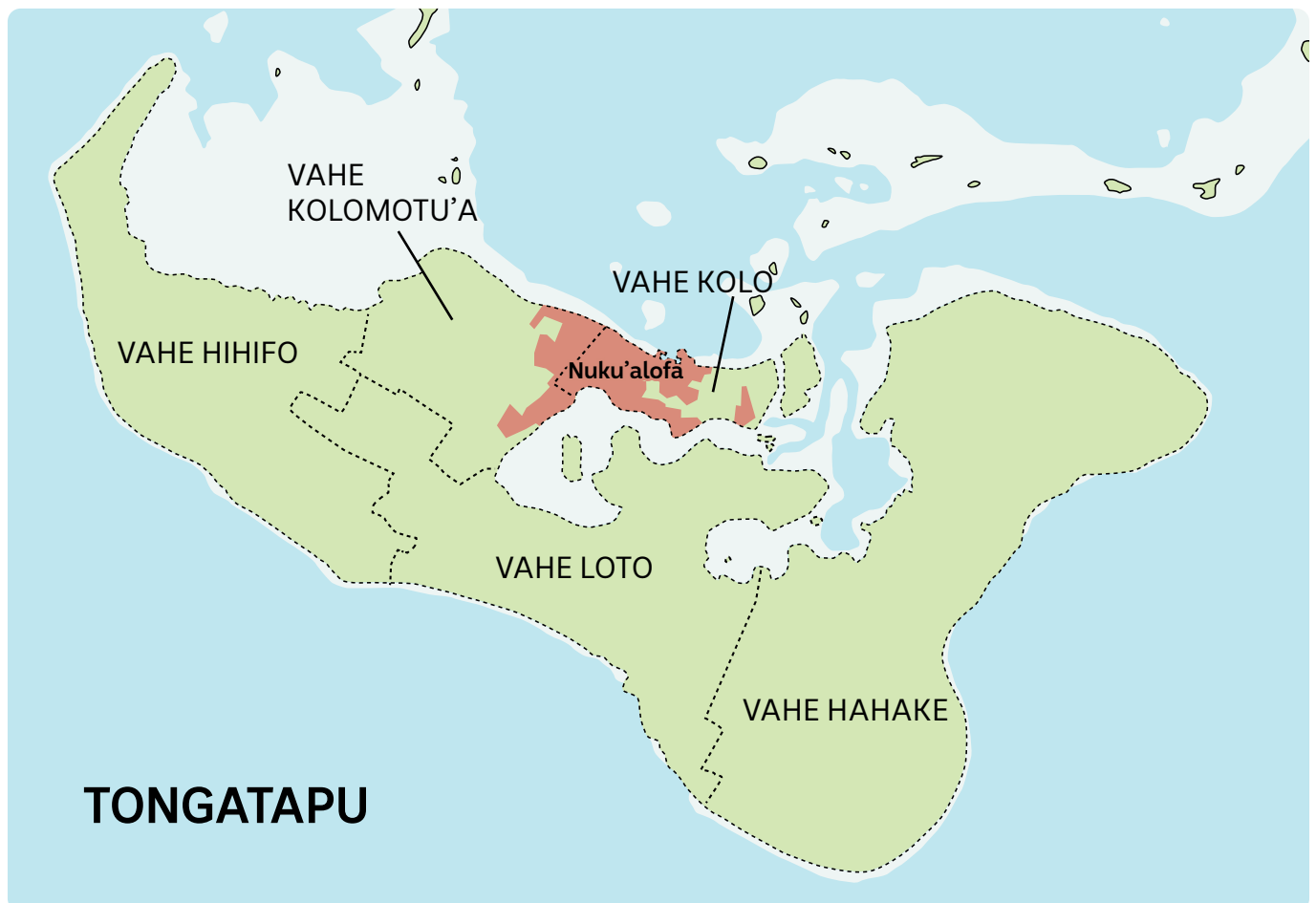
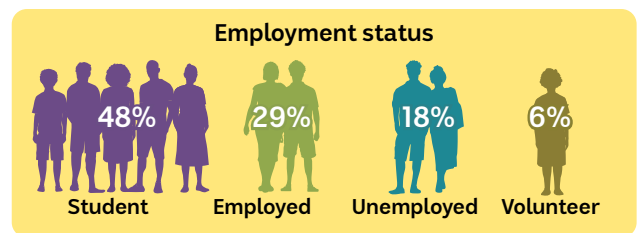
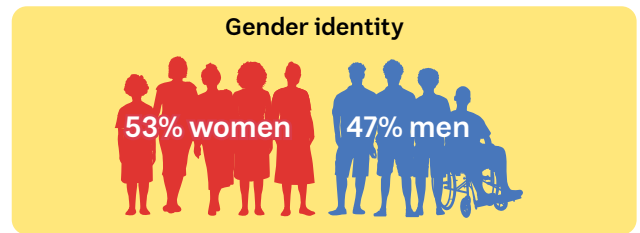
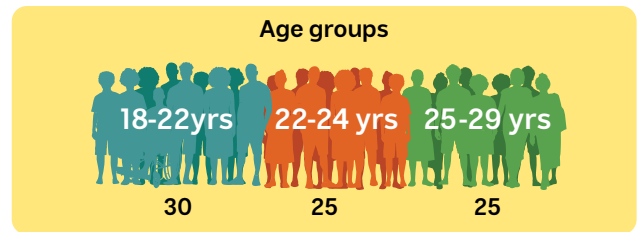
In terms of age, the study only included young people between the ages of 18 and 29. Of the 80 survey respondents, 30 (38%) were 18 to 22 years old, 25 (31%) were between 22 and 24 years, and 25 (31%) were between 25 to 29 years. The gender distribution was 53% female, 47% male.

Almost half the respondents (48%) were students, 29% were employed, 18% were unemployed, and 6% were engaged in volunteer work.

Respondent location

The survey participants were from the four main districts of the main island of Tongatapu:

- 57% of respondents were from the urban and densely populated area of “Vahe Kolo”
- 21% from “Vahe Loto”, the Central District in the middle of Tongatapu,
- 11% from the “Vahe Hahake”, the Eastern District, and
- 9% from the least populated villages of “Vahe Hihifo”, the Western district.



Online engagement

Internet access in Tonga is expensive. The main internet providers, TCC and Digicel, charge on average TOP\$65 for 35 gigabytes.



Facebook was the most frequently used site, regularly accessed by 96% of Tongan youth.

Followed by YouTube (75%), Tiktok (65%), and email servers (69%).



33.75% of the respondents stated that they were online for more than 7 hours. 30% said that they spend 4 to 5 hours online and 17.5% said they were online for only 2 to 3 hours. 13.75% said they spend between 6 to 7 hours, and only 5% said they were online one hour or less daily.

0-1 hr



5%

2-3 hrs



17.5%

4-5 hrs



30%

6-7 hrs



13.75%

7+ hrs



33.75%

Top 3 reasons young people go online



Talking with friends/family (51%)



School work (24%)



Professional purposes (24%)

Of the interview respondents, 70% did not pay for their own telephone card and/or data.



Tutu on the Beach, select GO! participants, and stakeholders at the launch of the campaign. Image Credit: Tutu on the Beach

Key insights

COVID-19

When community cases of COVID-19 were confirmed in February 2022, a national emergency period was announced by the Government of Tonga, with two weeks of hard lockdown followed by a series of “orange” code restrictions and curfews. All schools were shutdown in February, with secondary and tertiary institutions able to reopen in May. During the period of school closures, the Ministry of Education offered classes via radio programs and television programs and also tried to establish online learning tools, such as Moodle, for senior secondary school students.

Impacts on digital engagement

- 65% said that they had spent more time on the internet during the lockdown period. Many spent that time following news and information on the Pandemic.
- 60% of interview respondents affirmed that the internet was a good way to receive accurate COVID-19 information.


“It [the internet] helped to give explanations about COVID-19 and ways to prevent the spread of COVID-19”

“[there is] plenty of false information posted on the internet, which was unreliable”

- 66% said that they did not find their online experience during the COVID-19 outbreak stressful
- 68% stated that COVID-19 did not directly impact their behaviour towards the internet
- 86% reported they did not experience online bullying
- 88% did not experience peer pressure to change their digital behaviours and attitudes



Impacts on daily life and wellbeing

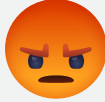
- 45% stated that COVID-19 negatively impacted their schoolwork. This represents a majority of those who were studying at the time. 36% stated their education was not affected, and 19% were not studying at the time.



Drivers for positive remote schoolwork experiences



- Good internet access
- Ministry of Education learning tools
- More time to study





Barriers preventing positive remote schoolwork experiences

- Limited computer/internet access
- Limited support at home
- Limited knowledge of learning tools
- Limited teacher engagement



- More than 1 in 5 (23%) young people stated that the lockdowns affected their mental health.

"It caused a lot of fear when I saw the great number of deaths globally"

However, some stated that the lockdown provided mental reprieve.

"It was a wonderful opportunity to rest my mind and connect with my family"

"I was not affected by the lockdown; it helped my mind have a good rest"

- 65% said that their families were affected financially. Banks and local markets were closed, limiting access to cash and trade opportunities.

Hunga Ha'apai Hunga Tonga volcanic eruption and tsunami

On 15 January 2022, Tonga experienced the largest recorded volcanic eruption since Krakatoa in 1883. The eruption created a Tsunami that wiped out the entire island of Mango, affected several other islands, severed the undersea telecommunications cable, and displaced approximately 3,000 people.

Impact on digital engagement

- 96% had no access to internet communications after the volcanic eruption
- 84% of the respondents said they were not able to communicate with the people they usually communicated with
- 33% used telephones to communicate with people after the eruption
- 51% said that their use of the internet has been impacted by the volcanic eruption internet shutdown

- 60% stated that their behaviour towards the internet changed. Some of the changes stated included:
 - * Prioritising time for spending with family and/or practising their faith
 - * Building more critical thinking skills around information shared online
 - * Understanding remote learning methods

More information:

- Learn more about the [GO! Project](#)
- Access the [GO! Tonga campaign videos](#)

Acknowledgements

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Traditionally dressed Tongan women going to church on Sunday at Neiafu, Vavau, Tonga. Image Credit: Sahara Frost (Adobe Stock)