

## The Digital Health Paradox: Bridging Equity Gaps Through Assisted Digital Models in Primary Care

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### Introduction

The rapid digital transformation of healthcare has revolutionized service delivery, disease monitoring, and patient engagement. However, this progress has also introduced a paradox: while digital infrastructure has expanded significantly, equitable utilization of digital health services remains limited. This emerging "digital health divide" is particularly relevant in primary care settings, where vulnerable populations depend most on accessible and inclusive health systems.<sup>1,2</sup>

### The Digital Health Usage Gap

According to the International Telecommunication Union, approximately 99% of the global population lives within reach of a mobile broadband network. However, a substantial "usage gap" persists. In low-income countries, the difference between network availability and actual internet use reaches 69%.<sup>3</sup>

This indicates that the challenge is no longer purely technological, but deeply rooted in social and structural determinants.

### Social Determinants of Digital Health Inequity

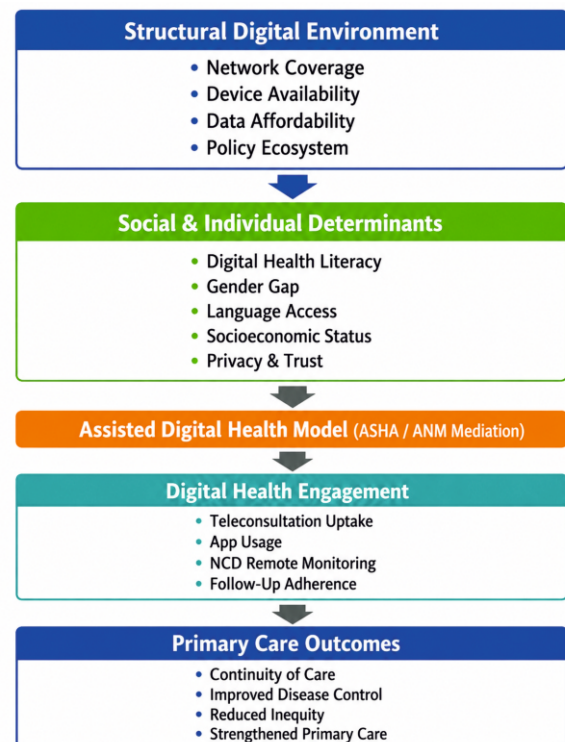
From a community medicine perspective, barriers to digital health are predominantly social rather than technical. Economic constraints, including the cost of smartphones and data services, continue to limit access. Digital health literacy remains a major challenge, affecting individuals' ability to effectively navigate teleconsultations and digital platforms.?

Language barriers further marginalize populations, as many platforms are designed in dominant languages. Additionally, concerns related to privacy, data security, and trust significantly influence willingness to engage with digital health services.?

### Assisted Digital Health: A Community-Centric Solution

To address these gaps, the concept of an "assisted digital health" model offers a pragmatic and scalable solution. In this approach, frontline health workers - such as ASHAs, ANMs, and community volunteers - serve as intermediaries between digital systems and the community.[4-7]

By facilitating teleconsultations, assisting with digital navigation, and building trust, these workers can enhance accessibility and utilization of digital health services. This hybrid model integrates technological efficiency with human support, making digital health more inclusive for underserved populations. The proposed framework is illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Conceptual framework of the assisted digital health model**

## Public Health Implications

If unaddressed, digital health interventions risk reinforcing existing health inequities. Integrating assisted digital models into primary care systems can improve service uptake, strengthen continuity of care, and enhance outcomes in chronic disease management.

## Conclusion

Digital health must evolve from a technology-driven approach to a people-centered strategy. Bridging the digital health divide requires not only infrastructure but also inclusive models that address social determinants. The assisted digital health approach represents a feasible pathway toward achieving equitable and effective primary care delivery in the digital era.

**Keywords:** Digital health, Equity, Primary care, Digital literacy, Telemedicine

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