

Safeguarding The Digital Generation: Qualitative Analysis of Africa-based Digital Technology Companies’ Policies Impacting African Youth Health and Well-being

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Africa-based digital technology companies (DTCs) lack consistent, youth-centric and transparent policies. While some demonstrate strong practices (e.g., HIPAA compliance, courteous debt collection), critical gaps remain in transparency, age verification, cross-regional alignment, and tailored safeguards. These gaps show how digital determinants of health (privacy, safety, access) and commercial determinants of health (profit-driven design, surveillance, marketing) directly shape youths’ mental, financial, emotional, and physical health. Building a sustainable, inclusive digital health ecosystem requires standardised youth-focused safeguards, enforced minimum standards, and ongoing monitoring of emerging trends and risks such as AI, gamification, and cross-border data flows.

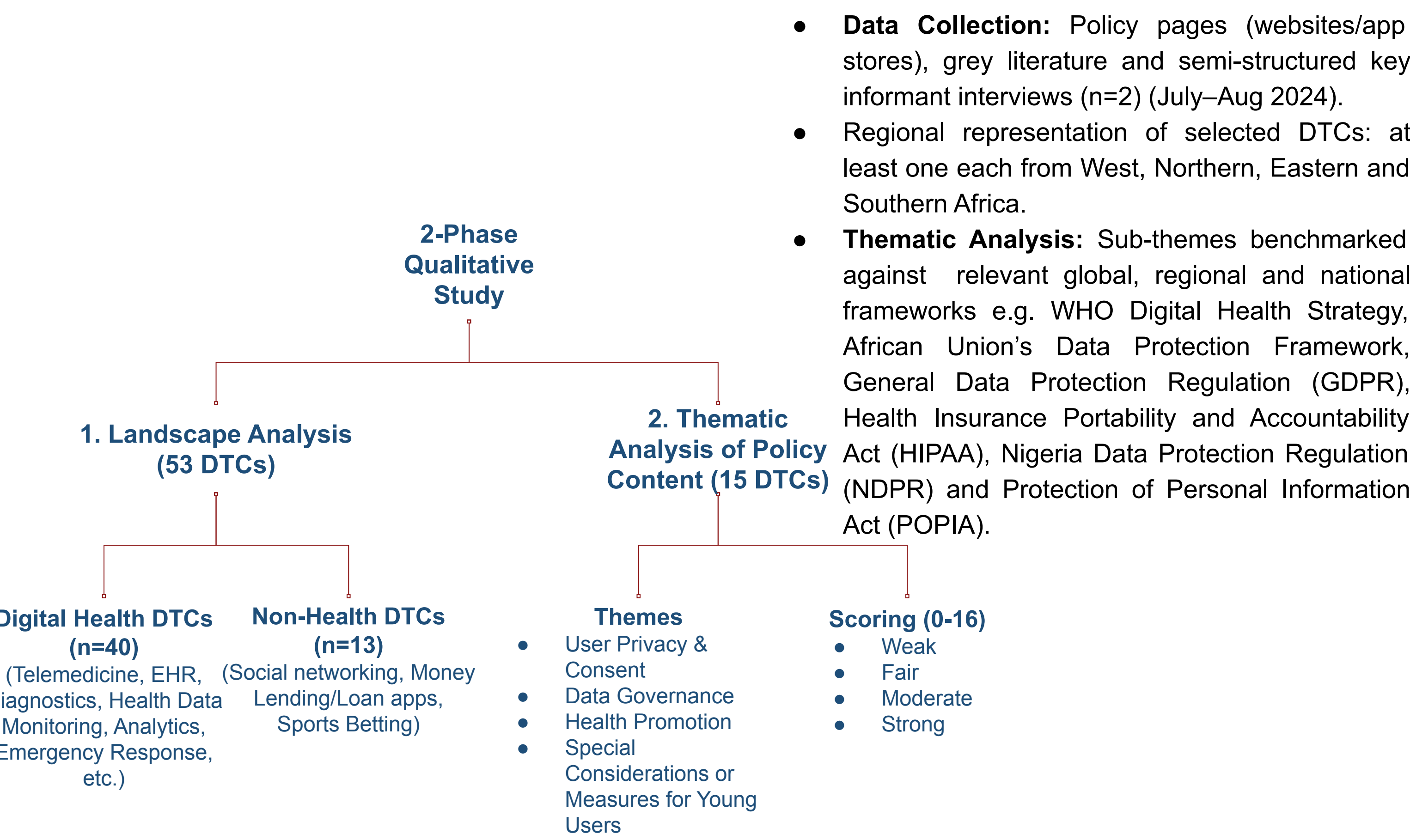
BACKGROUND

Africa has over 520 million internet users, with more than 60% under the age of 25. Digital technology companies (DTCs), including health apps, loan apps, social networks, and betting platforms, profoundly impact youths’ mental, financial, emotional, and physical health, as they rely on these platforms for services, connections, and resources for daily life. This impact can be positive or negative (and even overlap sometimes), depending on implemented policies by these companies, such as data collection and use, addictive product design, engaging marketing and retention strategies.

Despite increasing attention and emerging evidence around the digital determinants of health, policy safeguards across many DTCs in Africa remain inconsistent or absent, raising concerns about data privacy, well-being, youth inclusion, and protection from exploitation. Hence, this study focused on analysing the policies and strategies of Africa-based DTCs to protect and promote the health and well-being of young users.

Research Question: How do Africa-based DTCs’ policies protect or undermine the health and well-being of young users?

METHODS



RESULTS

Two DTC categories were thematically analysed: digital health (n=10) and non-health with health-related impacts (money lending, sports betting, social networking platforms) (n=5). Policy comprehensiveness and transparency varied, with one company scoring "weak", three scored "fair", six scored "moderate" and five DTCs scored "strong". **Notably, highest scoring company was a non-health DTC (betting platform).**

Positive policies include responsible gambling, courteous loan collections, health disclaimers, HIPAA compliance, anonymous access options, mental health support and content moderation. However, gaps were found in policy accessibility and transparency, weak or absent age verification processes, minimal youth-tailored experiences, limited culturally-sensitive and cross-regional policy alignment and compliance.

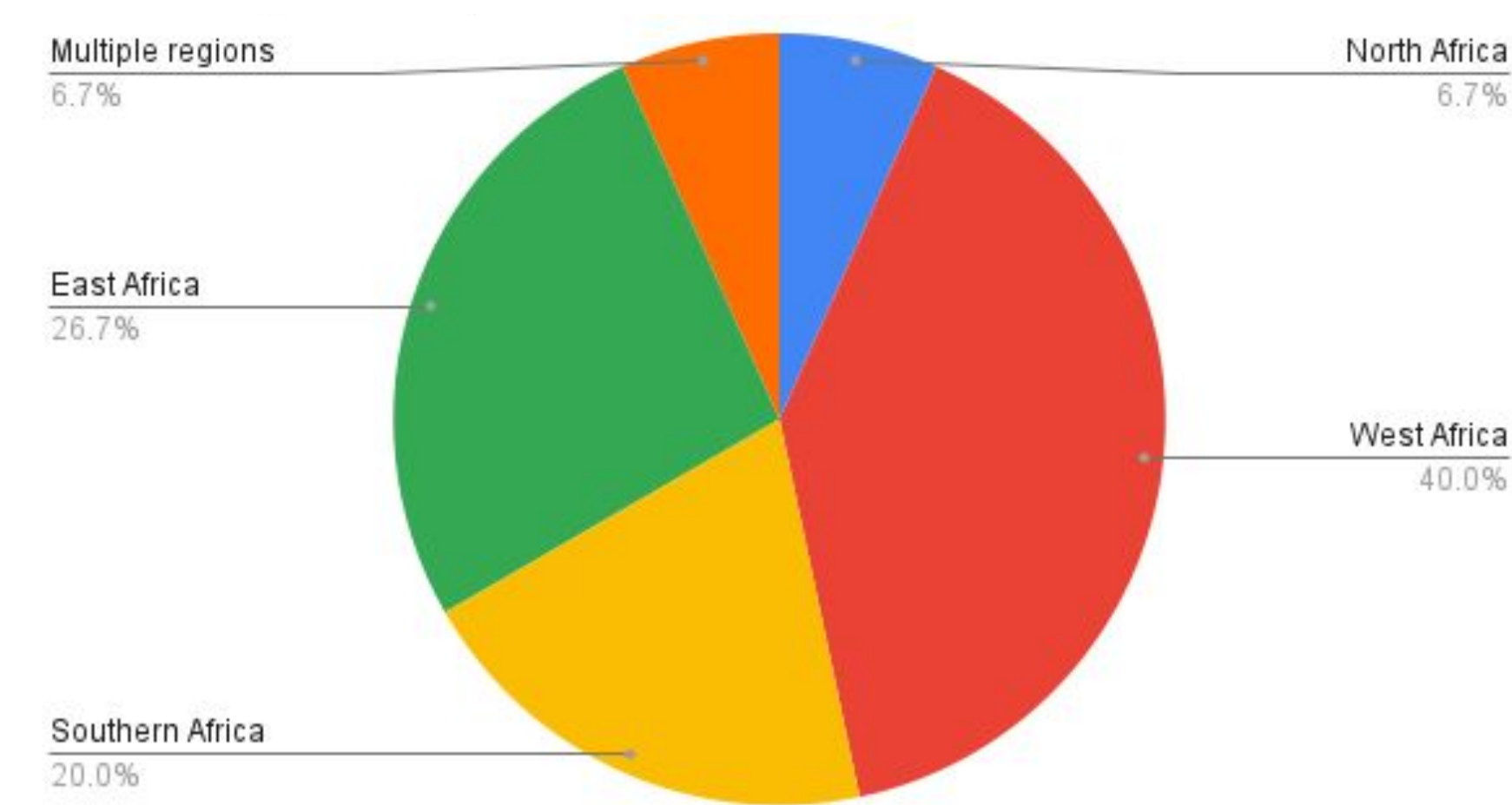


Fig 1. DTCs Regions of Operation in Africa

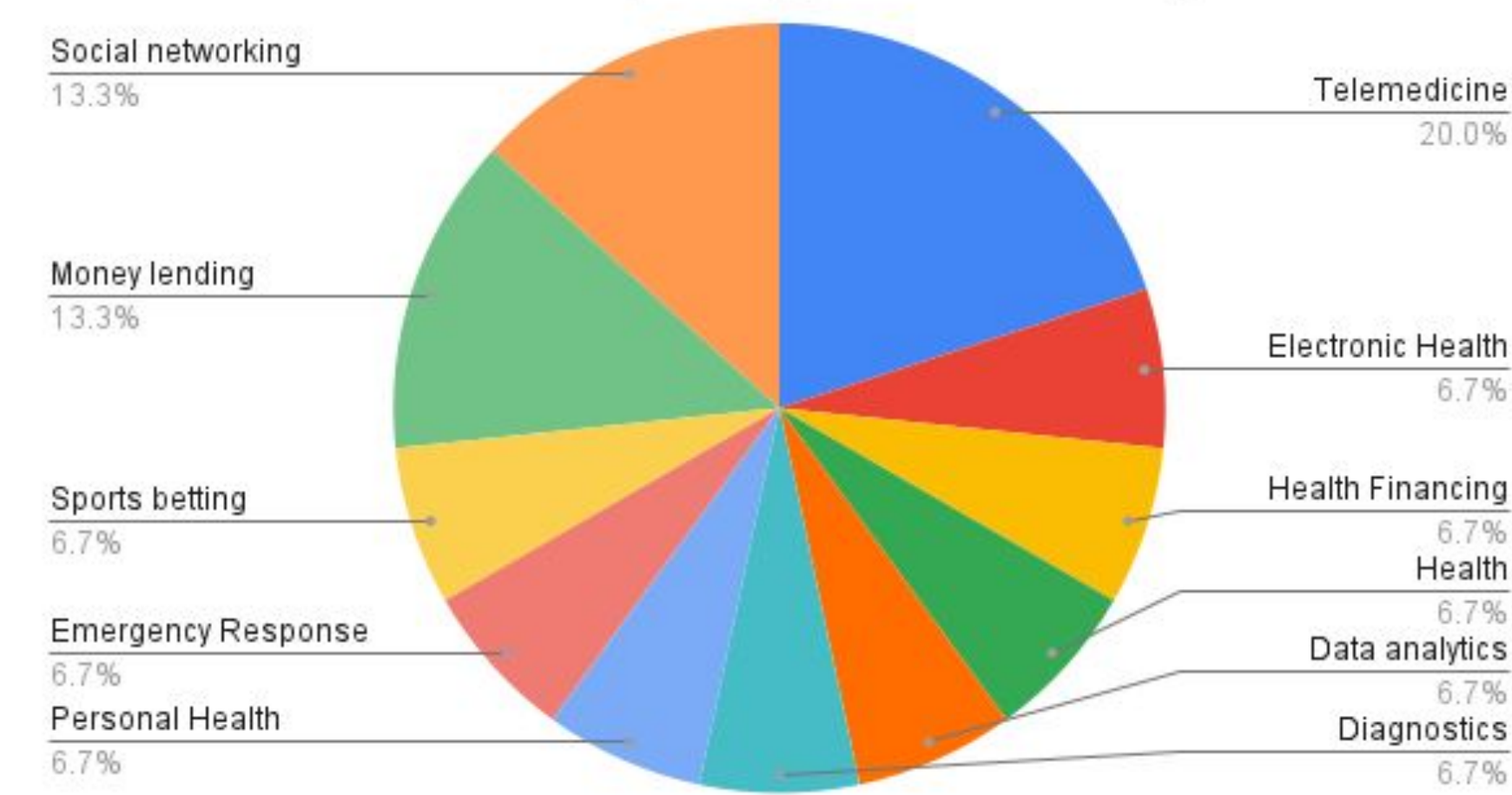


Fig 2. Overview of Analysed DTCs

RESULTS CONTINUED

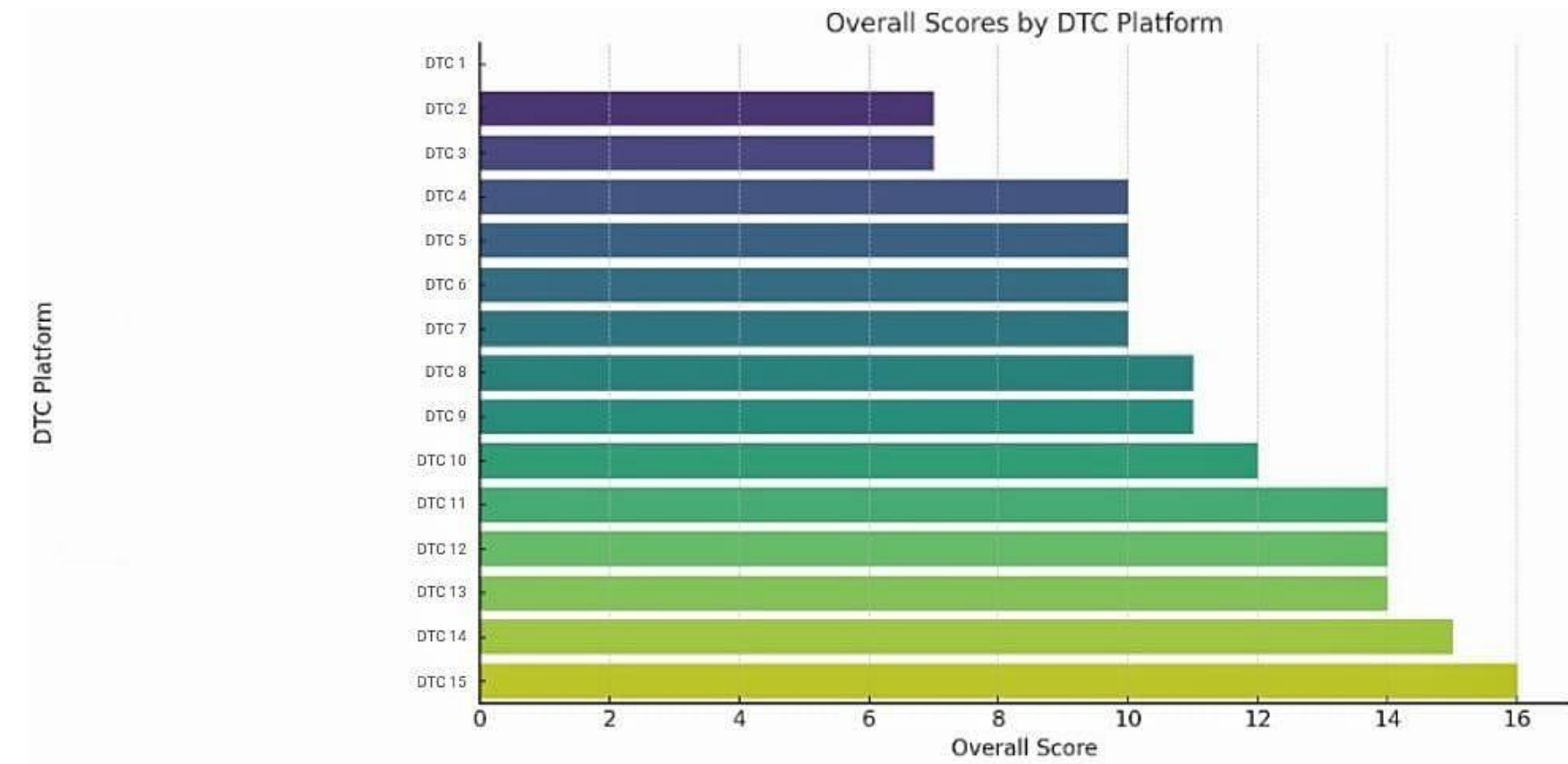


Fig 3. DTC Overall Scores

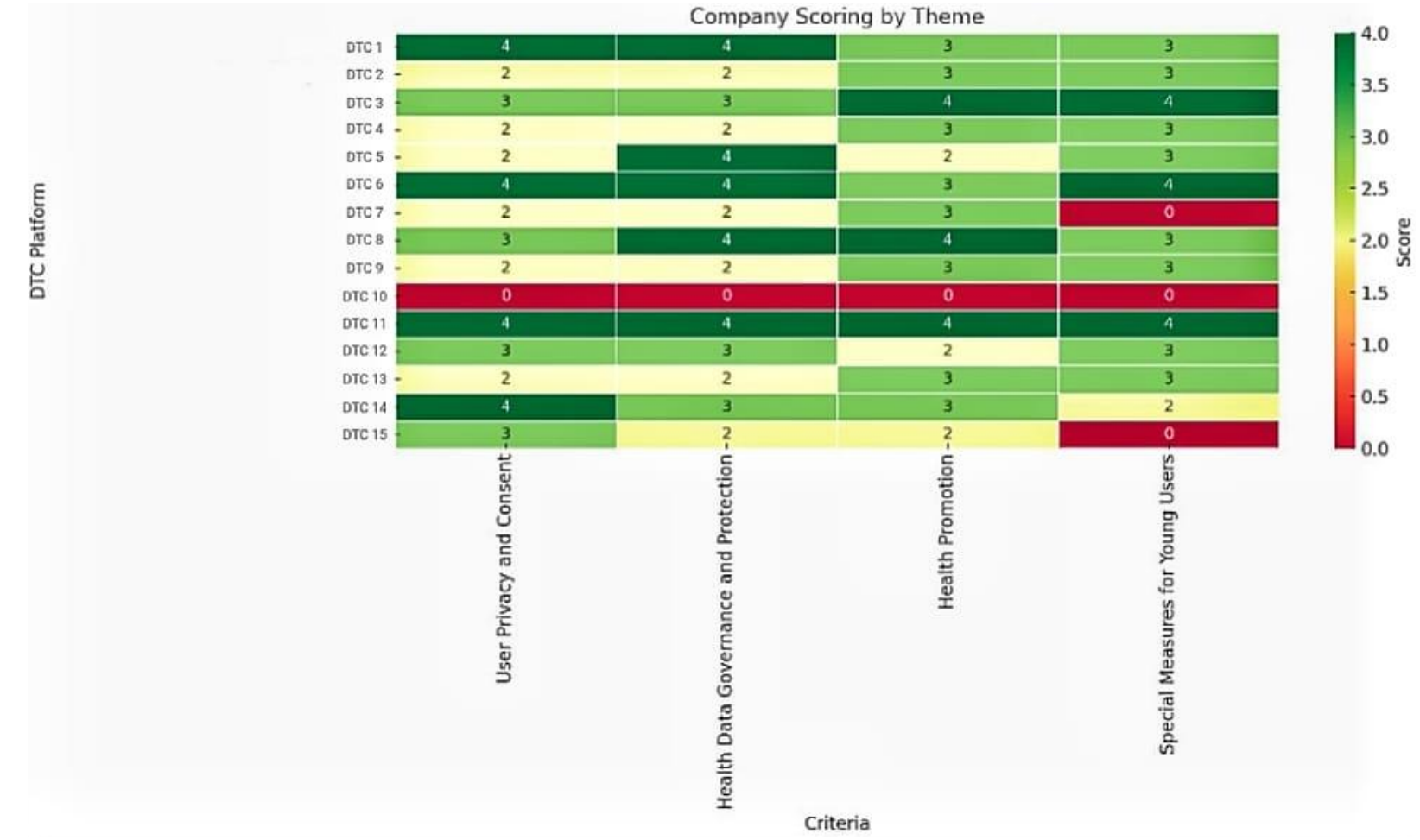


Fig 4. DTC Scoring by Themes

CONCLUSIONS

Policies across Africa-based digital technology companies remain fragmented and inconsistent, limiting young users’ ability to make informed choices about their data, health, and overall well-being. The findings show how weak user privacy and consent safeguards expose youths to exploitation, such as loan app misuse of contacts and inadequate updates for AI-driven services. In health data governance, permissive third-party data sharing and surveillance erode trust, despite some alignment with regulatory frameworks. Health promotion policies varied: some encouraged positive behaviours, but others (through disclaimers, rewards systems, and engagement design), contributed to technostress, sleep deprivation, and harmful digital consumption patterns. Youth protections were often insufficient, with poor age verification, weak parental consent, and limited culturally relevant safeguards. These gaps reflect how the digital determinants of health (e.g., privacy, access, online safety) and commercial determinants of health (e.g., profit-driven design, aggressive marketing, data commodification) directly shape young people’s health outcomes.

Variations in policy provisions not only affect privacy and engagement but also translate into health inequities by influencing mental, financial, and physical well-being. While differences in service scope across explains some variations, there is an urgent need for Africa-based DTCs to adopt transparent, accountable, youth-focused, and contextually relevant policies that align with global and regional standards. Policymakers and companies must collaborate to standardise and enforce minimum safeguards, strengthen youth inclusion, and establish continuous monitoring mechanisms that address emerging risks such as AI, gamification, and cross-border data sharing. Future research should also explore how these policies are implemented and experienced in practice by youths across diverse African contexts.

Closing these gaps is essential for building a sustainable and inclusive digital health ecosystem that mitigates harmful commercial influences and strengthens digital environments to protect and empower Africa’s youth, the continent’s most vital resource for the future.

ADDITIONAL KEY INFORMATION



Full paper: bit.ly/DigitalSafeguard

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