

COMBATING INFANT MORTALITY IN RURAL INDIA: EVIDENCE FROM A FIELD STUDY OF EHEALTH KIOSK IMPLEMENTATIONS

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Abstract:

The United Nations' Millennium Development Goals listed high infant mortality rates as a major problem in developing countries, especially in rural areas. Given the powerful information dissemination capabilities, information and communication technologies (ICTs) have been suggested as interventions to build infant care awareness and to modify healthcare behaviors. We examine how the use of one ICT intervention—specifically, eHealth kiosks disseminating authenticated and accessible medical information—can alleviate the problem of high infant mortality in rural India. We investigate how mothers' social networks affect their use of eHealth kiosks, seeking professional medical care for their infants and, ultimately, infant mortality. Drawing on the social epidemiology and social networks literatures, we focus on advice and hindrance from both strong and weak ties as the conduit of social influence on mothers' health-related behaviors for the care of their infants. Over a period of 7 years, we studied 4,620 infants across 10 villages where the eHealth kiosks were implemented along with support resources for proxy use. The results revealed that (1) eHealth kiosk use promotes seeking professional medical care and reduces infant mortality, (2) mothers are especially vulnerable to hindrance from both strong and weak ties as they choose to maintain the status quo of traditional infant healthcare practices (e.g., reliance on untrained personnel, superstitions, fatalism) in villages, and (3) advice from both strong and weak ties offers the potential to break down misplaced beliefs about infant healthcare practices and to develop literacy on seeking professional medical care. In contrast, in a comparative group of 10 neighboring villages, the reduction in infant mortality was not as pronounced and the effect of professional medical care in reducing infant mortality was lower. Our findings suggest that an ICT intervention can effectively address one of society's most important problems (i.e., infant mortality) even in parts of the world with limited resources and deep suspicion of technology and change. Overall, we believe such an ICT intervention will complement other investments being made, including the facilitation of use (proxy use) and provision of professional medical facilities to reduce infant mortality.

This is a joint work with Arun Rai, Tracy Ann Sykes and Ruba Aljafari. The paper is available on request.

Bio:

Viswanath Venkatesh is a Distinguished Professor and Billingsley Chair in Information Systems at the Walton College of Business, University of Arkansas. His research focuses on understanding the diffusion of technologies in organizations and society. For over a decade, he has worked with several companies and government agencies in different capacities ranging from a systems engineer to a special consultant to the Vice-President, and has rigorously studied real world phenomena. He is most proud of his ongoing work in villages in India, which he has presented at the United Nations where he has also served on an expert panel on the advancement of women in less developed countries. The sponsorship of his research has been about \$10M, including funding from government agencies. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in leading journals in information systems, organizational behavior, psychology, marketing and operations management journals. He is recognized to be among the most influential scholars in business and economics, with about 50,000 cites per Google Scholar and about 12,000 cites per Web of Science respectively. A recent article by Thompson Reuters identified him to be among the top-1% most-cited scholars in business and economics (e.g., highlycited.com). He recently published a book titled "*Road to Success: A Guide for Researchers in the Behavioral and Social Sciences*" (<http://vvenkatesh.com/book>). He is currently a Senior Editor (SE) at *MIS Quarterly* and *AIS Transactions on Human-Computer Interaction*. From 2008 to 2011, he served as an SE at *Information Systems Research*. He has served or is serving on several other boards including *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *Journal of AIS*, *Journal of Operations Management*, *Production and Operations Management*, and *Management Science*.