

The changing role of communication technology in reproductive health

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Impact paragraph

Findings from this manuscript aim at providing an updated look at the role played by communication technologies in fostering better reproductive health attitudes and behaviour. More importantly, it establishes a causal relation between mobile phone connectivity and greater reproductive health- and HIV-related knowledge, and HIV testing uptake as well as reduced prejudice against people living with HIV (PLWH). Throughout, the dissertation demonstrates that mobile phone technology has become a key element in shaping attitudes towards maternal health and contraceptive use, replacing TV and radio as the go-to communication technology.

Based on these results, governments should consider incorporating mobile phone technologies in health communication campaigns regarding sexual and reproductive health, HIV testing, and HIV-related stigma reduction. In a similar way, national and international actors should work together to build platforms that enable individuals to harness the full potential of mobile phones. Audience-centred communication platforms – as apps on mobile phones or informational material reachable through USSD codes, can be used to combine multiple interventions and campaigns and increase user engagement, resulting in a larger impact on health behaviour. Communication campaigns can be built on pre-existing platforms, just as generalist TV and radio shows have been used in the past to discuss health-related topics, to minimise costs and increase acceptability among mobile phone owners.

Future research should move from the findings of this study to investigate the role of the “communication component” of mobile phones on reproductive health attitudes and behaviour. Understanding how mobile phones influence one’s social network and how this has an impact on reproductive health would be a necessary

step to unlock the full potential of mobile-based health awareness campaigns. Chapter V already hypothesises that mobile phones' ability to create open bridging structures enables individuals to leverage the diversity of their contacts to expose them to new ideas, knowledge, and information. Future research should work towards testing this hypothesis, moving beyond the data limitations present in this manuscript, to complete the analysis of impact mechanisms started in this study.

About the author

Francesco Iacoella was born in Rome, Italy in 1991. He completed his undergraduate studies in Political Science (2013) and obtained his first graduate degree in International Relations (2016) there, and then moved to Maastricht to complete the MSc in Public Policy and Human Development at UNU-MERIT in 2017. After his graduation, he started working as a consultant for UNU-MERIT to evaluate the scale-up of a cash-based transfer provided by WFP to refugees in Kenya. Since then, he has participated in numerous projects for different agencies, including WFP, UNDP, UNICEF, FAO, and The World Bank.

Next to his consultancy work, he has been involved in academic research projects. Topics of interest to him have been the socio-economic determinants of political participation, impacts of benefit conditionality, and child and maternal health. His work on maternal healthcare access inspired him to obtain a PhD.

He currently works as a consultant at UNU-MERIT for the evaluation of WFP activities in refugee camps in Kenya, and he is a collaborating researcher at UNU-WIDER in Helsinki and Istituto Affari Internazionali in Rome.