

New study shows how online endorsement could help address COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy

April 5 2021, by Megan Cox



A medical assistant prepares a dose of a COVID-19 vaccine to be administered to a patient. Credit: Public domain image courtesy of Lisa Ferdinando, U.S. Department of Defense

A third of the UK adult population intend to use social media and personal messaging to encourage people to get vaccinated against

COVID-19, a new, large scale, multi-university study involving Loughborough researchers has found.

In addition, a significant minority—almost one-tenth—say they intend to use the same platforms to discourage others from getting vaccinated. And most of the public—around 57% - are still undecided on if or how they will endorse the vaccines online.

The study, accepted for publication and in press at the journal Social Media & Society, is based on an October 2020 survey of 5,114 UK adults that explored how people's attitudes and their consumption of COVID-19 news links to their intention to use [social media](#) and personal messaging apps to encourage or discourage vaccination.

The new article—led by Professor Andrew Chadwick of Loughborough's Online Civic Culture Centre—is part of the ongoing Oxford Coronavirus Explanations, Attitudes, and Narratives (OCEANS) project, which brings together [social scientists](#) and medical scientists from Oxford University (including members of the Oxford Vaccine Group), Loughborough University, and Cambridge, Aston, and Bristol universities.

The project identifies six 'media diets' for getting news and information about COVID-19 among the UK public. They are:

THE SIX MEDIA DIETS FOR GETTING NEWS AND INFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19					
NEWS AVOIDERS	MAINSTREAM/OFFICIAL NEWS SAMPLERS	SUPER SEEKERS	OMNIVORES	SOCIAL MEDIA DEPENDENT	TV DEPENDENT
Use all media sources well below average	Use mainstream sources (newspapers online and in print, television, radio) and official sources (government and NHS websites) slightly more than average, while their use of social media is below average	Use all sources far more than the average	Use all sources, but each source is used only moderately above average	Use all social media much more frequently than average and all mainstream and official sources less frequently	Get news and information about COVID-19 mainly from television and use other sources well below the average

The six 'media diets'. Credit: Loughborough University

The researchers looked at how the different media diets link to vaccine hesitancy and two key attitudes: 'conspiracy mentality' - the hostile distrust of public authorities based on false belief that secret organisations influence political decisions—and the 'news finds me' perception—where people give low priority to active monitoring of news and rely more on their online networks of friends for information.

The team then explored the connections between media diet, attitudes, and use of social media and personal messaging apps to endorse the COVID-19 vaccines.

The data show a clear link between vaccine hesitancy and the intention to use social media and personal messaging apps to discourage others from getting vaccinated.

Other key findings include:

- Overall, super-seeker and omnivorous media diets are most likely to be associated with online encouragement of COVID-19 vaccination
- The combination of a social media dependent media diet and conspiracy mentality is most likely to be associated with online discouragement of vaccination
- The combination of avoiding news and having a 'news-finds-me' attitude is likely to be associated with the online discouragement of others from taking the vaccine.

Of the findings, Professor Chadwick said: "Vaccine hesitancy is a longstanding problem, but it has assumed great urgency due to the pandemic. By early 2021, the UK had the world's highest COVID-19 mortality per million of population.

"We know that people's media diets provide them with the information they share online, and we know online endorsement can make a difference to people's attitudes and decisions.

"Our findings suggest that when people gain a broad perspective, from a range of different media and information sources, they gather evidence and are more likely to positively endorse vaccination online. This is good news for collective public health.

"Avoiding news and having a 'news-finds-me' attitude is perhaps most troubling, because this combination of factors links with the online discouragement of others from taking the vaccine.

"In addition, the connections between conspiracy mentality, social media use, and online discouragement are likely to undermine the UK vaccination programme, to some extent."

"On a more optimistic note, our research shows that only a small minority of the UK public say they will go online to overtly discourage others from taking a COVID-19 vaccine. Public health communication based on direct contact and empowering people to share good quality information online could contribute to improved vaccine take-up", commented Professor Chadwick.

The paper outlines recommendations for public health communication that the study team hopes will "guide simple, practical interventions to improve vaccine take-up".

Recommendations include:

- Direct contact through the post, workplace, or community structures, and through phone counselling via local health services, to reach news avoiders
- TV public information advertisements that point people away from TV and encourage them to visit authoritative information sources, such as NHS and other public health websites, which then feature clear and simple ways for people to share material in their online social networks
- Informative social media campaigns to provide COVID news super seekers with good resources to share, while also encouraging the social media dependent to browse away from social media platforms and visit reliable and authoritative online sources.

The researchers also advise that social media companies should step up their removal of [vaccine](#) disinformation and anti-vax accounts, and such

efforts should be monitored by well-resourced, independent organisations.

The full research paper, titled 'Online Social Endorsement and COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy in the UK', can be found [here](#).

More information: www.lboro.ac.uk/media/media/re..._accepted_Feb_25.pdf

Provided by Loughborough University

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