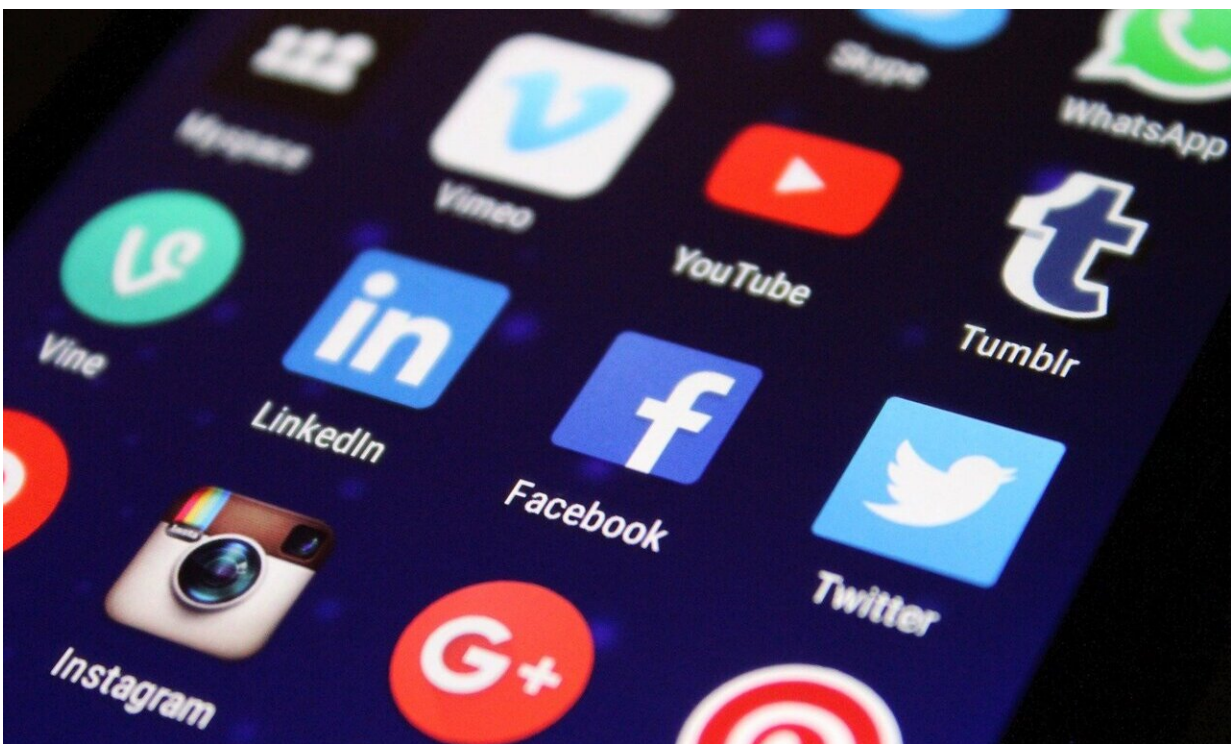


Predictors for antivax sentiments: Low trust in government, conspiracy beliefs, watching YouTube

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People who look to social media for information, particularly YouTube, are less willing to be vaccinated against COVID-19, according to a new publication from the universities of Oxford and Southampton whose

researchers are urging the government and social media firms to take urgent action over the findings.

Oxford Professor Melinda Mills and Southampton's Professor Will Jennings and their research team found unregulated [social media](#) sources pose a particular problem in contributing to vaccine hesitancy. The article warns that [social media users](#) can fall prey to an 'echo chamber' effect—where tailored recommendations, based on an individual's 'watch history,' underline an individual's concerns and rarely provide alternative or expert views.

Professor Mills said: "Misinformation proliferates on some [social media platforms](#) because users receive content suggestions aligned with their fears and watch histories, driving them into deeper rabbit holes. Information is often presented by non-experts, with limited fact checking, making it difficult to gauge the accuracy or balance the information."

The paper warned: "Those who obtain information from relatively unregulated social media sources such as YouTube, that have recommendations tailored by watch-history, are less likely to be willing to become vaccinated."

The researchers are calling for action from governments, health officials and social media companies—and more information to fill the 'knowledge voids.'

The study also shows that trust is key.

Professor Jennings noted: "Misinformation thrives when there is a lack of trust in government, politics and elites with a broader lesson that authorities need to communicate truthfully, clearly and consistently."

Collecting data from a survey of 1476 adults in the UK and five focus groups during the first vaccine roll-out in the country in December 2020, they found that a low personal perceived risk from COVID-19 was linked to [vaccine hesitancy](#). Complacency also emerged from a misunderstanding that 'herd immunity' had been reached and only the vulnerable need to be vaccinated. Skepticism around COVID-19 and vaccines were linked to beliefs that the unequal deaths in certain population groups were a form of population control, that herd immunity had been reached, and that the virus was man-made or not as deadly as reported.

Professor Mills added: "There was often a knowledge void in understanding the risks. Although there are some who hold conspiratorial beliefs, many were simply trying to make sense of fragmented, dynamic and confusing information, often accessing social media for clarity."

The publication says more than 80% of Europeans and more than 70% of Americans use the internet as a source for health information, and finds growth in Internet use and reliance on social [media](#) sources such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and TikTok has changed the landscape of information gathering.

The video sharing platform, YouTube—which contains a high percentage of negative claims—was particularly linked to hesitancy.

The publication said: "YouTube users were significantly less willing to be vaccinated, with a 45% probability of vaccine willingness... A study of YouTube vaccine content found 65.5% of videos discouraged [vaccine](#) use focussing on autism, undisclosed risks, adverse reactions and mercury in vaccines."

Action is essential, according to the team, which maintained:

"Governments should establish an engaging web presence to fill knowledge gaps... Sites remain unregulated and not operating as 'publishers' [should be] forced to present balanced [information](#), with misinformation or conspiracy theories quickly becoming 'viral.'"

More information: Lack of Trust, Conspiracy Beliefs, and Social Media Use Predict COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy . *Vaccines*, 2021, doi.org/10.3390/vaccines9060593

Provided by University of Oxford

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