

Not sure about vaccines? How messaging is framed makes a difference, new research shows

May 13 2024, by Anthony Borrelli



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

There were moments during the COVID-19 pandemic's early days when real life might have felt ripped out of the pages of Stephen King's *The*

Stand, a novel about an extremely contagious and lethal influenza strain that sweeps across the U.S.

While COVID didn't leave the world a post-apocalyptic landscape, it spotlighted the divide between those who would flock to a [vaccine](#) as it was rolled out and those who declined based on personal, political or religious grounds, regardless of public health messaging. So, what's the best way to communicate with a vaccine-hesitant person about a vaccine's potential benefits?

It's not an easy question to answer, but new research involving Binghamton University's School of Management (SOM) Assistant Professor of Marketing Yang (Jenny) Guo found that a one-size-fits-all approach to communicating these messages isn't effective. Message framing plays a crucial role depending on the person's mindset, Guo said, so it requires communicating in different ways for different people.

The research is [published](#) in the *International Journal of Research in Marketing*.

Researchers determined that loss-based messaging is the most constructive method to communicate with vaccine-hesitant people to ensure they're completely informed about the scope of their decision. Based on the findings, researchers proposed revisiting [communication strategies](#) to encourage more people to vaccinate for various illnesses.

While the COVID-19 pandemic provided the most recent context, Guo and fellow researchers generalized their study to vaccinations for different contagious viruses, particularly influenza.

The researchers' findings come after collecting data from more than 2,700 online participants across the U.S., the U.K., China and India. After controlling for participants' age, gender, education, [political](#)

[ideology](#) and some other factors that had been found affecting their vaccination tendency, the study showed that its findings centered on implicit mindsets toward vaccination as a form of high-cost, high-uncertainty prevention behavior.

"We found those with a fixed mindset, which in this case are people most likely to refuse vaccines, respond better when the messaging is framed around how not taking a vaccine would lead to negative outcomes including financial or family costs, even their life, compared to when the messaging is framed around how taking a vaccine would lead to [positive outcomes](#)," said Guo, who co-authored the research project.

"It's an interesting contrast to what you might see in a bulk of the message framing for vaccines that promotes a 'new normal' and how taking them helps people gain something," Guo added.

This finding was particularly noteworthy because although prior research has indicated message framing doesn't matter for people with fixed mindsets, Guo said, those studies centered on lower-cost behaviors such as avoiding the risk of skin cancer by not applying sunscreen.

By contrast, the study Guo helped conduct found message framing doesn't impact people with what researchers describe as a growth mindset—people who believe their characteristics can be changed through individual efforts.

This is because people with a growth mindset believe that efforts lead to positive changes, according to the researchers, so they may be motivated to undertake whatever efforts are necessary, such as vaccination, to enhance their current condition regardless of message framing.

"Our research suggests that if there is a next pandemic and if there's a

new vaccine we need to take, the better strategy is to use loss framing when promoting that vaccine," Guo said. "While gain-framing can work for some, it's not going to persuade the people health officials really need to reach. Loss-based messaging framing is going to work much better for those who are extremely hesitant to take a vaccine."

More information: Shaobo Li et al, Loss framing increases entity theorists' vaccine uptake, *International Journal of Research in Marketing* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ijresmar.2024.04.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2024.04.002)

Provided by Binghamton University

Citation: Not sure about vaccines? How messaging is framed makes a difference, new research shows (2024, May 13) retrieved 7 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-05-vaccines-messaging-difference.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.