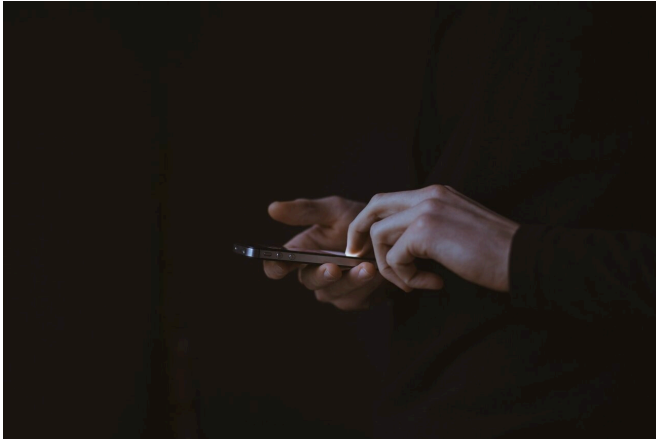


How social media could be affecting COVID vaccine hesitancy

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A social media campaign could help to advertise the positives of COVID-19 vaccination and counter the negative posts and comments which are putting Australia's vaccination program at risk, a UNSW researcher says.

ARC Discovery Early Career Research Fellow in UNSW Science's School of Psychology, Dr. Kate Faasse says [social media](#) is exaggerating COVID vaccine side effects and is playing a key role in people avoiding vaccination.

"Studies show that people are more likely to share their [negative experiences](#) on social media than their positive ones—so what you see online isn't the whole story, or necessarily the most likely one," she says.

Dr. Faasse's research has shown that people generally tend to pay closer attention to negative [information](#) than positive information. This tendency, which is called negative bias, extends to negative information about vaccines—including side effects.

"Knowing this about ourselves and making sure we keep a look out for the positive information too, can help to ensure we are getting more balanced information about the vaccines," she says.

One of the focuses of Dr. Faasse's research interest is in why some people experience side effects even when they have received a placebo, but she has recently started researching ways to increase the vaccination uptake in Australia.

Much can be learned from peoples' motivations.

Lotto, property or a holiday abroad

"Money isn't always the best motivator," says the health psychology researcher, who advises caution in using cash payments as inducements to getting vaccinated, as they could backfire.

"While [cash payments](#) might encourage some people to get a vaccine, they can put others off. This group of people can worry that the vaccine must be risky if they're being paid to take it and feel suspicious of the government's motives for offering the payment."

Big lottery jackpots, like US states of California and Ohio have, might be more effective in encouraging people to get a COVID vaccine. In Ohio, this approach has increased vaccination rates [by 28%](#). In Hong Kong, those who get the vaccine will go in a draw to win an apartment.

"The chance of winning a really large amount of money might be more motivating than the guarantee of receiving a smaller cash payment," Dr. Faasse says.

"When we're talking life-changing amounts of money, people start to imagine what they would do with it if they won, and after more than a year of pandemic restrictions and a lot of hardship, that's a nice feeling."

The government could also encourage Australians to get the jab by giving them the possibility of being able to travel internationally again, perhaps without the need to quarantine in hotels once they return home.

Information overload and vaccine hesitancy

Beyond individual motivation, the amount of information about COVID vaccines on social media—some accurate and some less accurate—can be confusing and overwhelming.

The result of the flood of information has tangible outcomes: studies have shown that the harmful effects of social information can translate into actual side effects in people who otherwise might not report side effects, Dr. Faasse says.

In one of the studies, researchers gave people placebo pills—sugar pills—and told them that they were taking an active medication. Some participants just read a standard information leaflet about side effects, and others saw another participant (actually an actor in the study) report that they had had side effects.

"Even though everyone in the study took a sugar pill, people who saw someone else talk about their side effects also had more side effects themselves," Dr. Faasse says.

She says people posting about COVID vaccine side effects on social media are probably having similar effects on those who read their posts—and that's mirrored in recent concerns from medical experts, who are observing Australia's rising vaccine hesitancy; a survey last week suggested one-third of Australians were unlikely to get vaccinated.

The main concern for most people, according to recent research, is side effects.

Shifting the discussion on side effects

Dr. Faasse says studies are also showing that while COVID vaccines can have side effects, they are typically milder and less common than people tend to assume, and this should be communicated to the public.

She says a UK study, where an app recorded people's side effects from the Pfizer and Astra Zeneca vaccines, found that four out of five people who got the Pfizer vaccine, and three out of five who got the Astra Zeneca, had no systemic side effects (such as headache and fatigue).

Yet anecdotal evidence suggests that most of them did not go onto social media to report they were fine.

The app study also found that those who did have side effects had short-term adverse effects which were moderate in frequency, mild in severity, and short-lived.

"Knowing how many people don't experience side effects is important—it gives us a more realistic view of what to expect and helps us to focus on the benefits of these vaccines," Dr. Faasse says.

Media coverage a 'powerful impact'

Studies have also shown that media coverage of side effects can increase other people's reporting of their own side effects, she says.

"Media coverage that focuses on side effects such as rare blood clots from the Astra Zeneca vaccine can have a very powerful impact on people's own concerns and experiences," she says.

The federal government has been keen to be transparent about any adverse COVID vaccine [side effects](#), but Dr. Faasse suggests that more contextual information be provided for accuracy and balance.

She says emerging evidence that about 1 in 250,000 people (or 0.0004%) could develop blood clots from Astra Zeneca vaccine, whilst it's not well known that about 20 percent of patients diagnosed with COVID will develop blood clots.

"And yet in comparison around one in 10,000 women taking the contraceptive pill will experience blood clots."

Dr. Faasse says there is evidence that people who feel more at risk from COVID are more willing to get

vaccinated.

She says that it will be difficult to shift the views of a small number of people, but those who will refuse the vaccination under any circumstances are in the minority.

"Instead, we should focus resources on providing information and reassurance to people who are currently uncertain about getting their COVID-19 vaccination," she says.

"If people are willing to get the [vaccine](#) to protect themselves and their loved ones, then Australia can start to focus on life after this pandemic."

More information: Leask J, et al. Communicating with patients and the public about COVID-19 vaccine safety: recommendations from the Collaboration on Social Science in Immunization. *Med J Aust* 2021; www.mja.com.au/journal/2021/co...fety-recommendations [Preprint, 17 May 2021].

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