

Normative interventions can drive COVID-19 vaccination – and may not require shifting underlying negative beliefs.

The power of norms to drive vaccination in contexts of high misinformation and distrust of public actors

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INTRODUCTION

It is easy to assume that:

- behavior reflects beliefs, and
- adopting a behavior requires first shifting negative beliefs

For COVID-19 vaccination this would suggest that shifting stubborn negative beliefs about the vaccine is necessary as a prerequisite to vaccination, even in places with widespread misinformation and high distrust of authorities.

However, evidence from behavioral science and our own formative research suggest normative influences may be sufficiently powerful to prompt vaccination, with or without actually changing underlying negative beliefs.

METHODS

N: 73 in-depth interviews

Location: Liberia, Cameroon and Côte d'Ivoire.

Participants:

- Health providers,
- community leaders,
- religious leaders,
- community members, and
- other local stakeholders in vaccine roll-out.

Participants represented a range of vaccine statuses (unvaccinated, partially or fully vaccinated) and geographies (urban / rural).

Several insights emerged from qualitative analysis of transcripts, including themes of normative influence on vaccine acceptance.

DISCUSSION

Our findings suggest that **norms** play a powerful role in driving COVID-19 vaccination behavior.

- Negative beliefs about the vaccine stemming from misinformation may be especially difficult to counter in areas where trust in authorities is low or their motivations are questioned.
- Normative interventions may help to counter negative beliefs but may also nudge some towards vaccination *without necessarily shifting underlying negative attitudes or beliefs*.
- In either case, **this suggests normative interventions, and in particular those that increase the visibility of vaccination among peers, may have a critical role to play in vaccination efforts.**

RESULTS

Insights from formative research:

Seeing others successfully get vaccinated boosts confidence

People are more willing to get vaccinated after seeing people they know or identify with getting vaccinated first without any problems.

Seeing others get vaccinated can create social pressure or desirability

People may desire to model after peers they admire or may feel pressure to do what others are doing so as not to be seen as different, even if they still harbor some personal concerns.

Seeing others can directly counter misinformation-related hesitancy

In some cases, seeing peers vaccinate can serve to directly counter beliefs—for example, seeing that a friend who got vaccinated is now pregnant can help to overcome misinformation-related concerns about infertility.

Perceived role model status or desire to set a good example can help override personal doubts

Despite significant reservations and concerns about the COVID-19 vaccine, local leaders and health providers expressed an obligation to set a good example for the community and adopt positive behaviors by getting vaccinated.

HIGHLIGHTS

Insights suggest that highlighting norms – in particular, increasing visibility of vaccination among peers – can help to drive uptake

"...when you see more and more people who have been vaccinated and have had no side effects, you too will decide to vaccinate..."
– Community member, Cameroon

"When the boss gets vaccinated, I stay without getting vaccinated—why? I said, 'vaccinate me.' If it did something to you it will do something to me."
– Community member, Cameroon



"Youth enthusiasm, do it in the sense of fashion effect... they have seen others do; 'why can't I go do'?"
– Local stakeholder, Cameroon



"I took the vaccine because I saw some of my friends who took the vaccine moving around smoothly."
– Health provider, Liberia

"...For someone to come and be vaccinated, I had to be vaccinated to motivate the population. When we went to the community, you had to be the model, the example."
– Provider, Cameroon



"I myself in the early days didn't want to get vaccinated. I said, 'Ah I haven't had my child yet. I don't want to get this vaccine; I would have heard that if we do, we won't be able to have child anymore.' And what motivated me (to get vaccinated)..I have a friend, she took vaccine and she got pregnant, so that encouraged me."
– Health provider, Côte d'Ivoire.

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