

The Link between COVID-19 Pandemic and Vaccine Hesitancy

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Aisha Rajapakse¹, Rynee S. Wijesinghe² and Sampath Wijesinghe^{3*}

¹Senior at Creighton University pursuing a Psychology Major on the PA-track, Creighton University, Omaha, NE

²Junior at Fresno State University Pursuing a Psychology Major and Chemistry Minor, California State University, Fresno, CA

³Clinical Associate Professor, Stanford School of Medicine, Stanford, CA; HIV Specialist and Primary Care PA-C, Copeland Medical Healthcare Partners, Fresno, CA; Let's Stop HIV Together CDC Clinical Ambassador

***Corresponding Author:** Sampath Wijesinghe, Clinical Associate Professor, Stanford School of Medicine, Stanford, CA; HIV Specialist and Primary Care PA-C, Copeland Medical Healthcare Partners, Fresno, CA; Let's Stop HIV Together CDC Clinical Ambassador.

Abstract

Vaccination remains a cornerstone of public health, yet persistent pockets of vaccine hesitancy challenge its widespread acceptance. This review explores the intricate interplay between the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccine hesitancy, examining how the introduction of the COVID-19 vaccine has influenced broader attitudes towards vaccination. A systematic review of literature spanning 2021 to 2023 elucidates the multifaceted factors influencing vaccine acceptance and hesitancy, including socio-demographic disparities, misinformation, and healthcare access. Findings reveal a nuanced landscape, where sociodemographic variables significantly impact vaccine acceptance, while misinformation from media sources exacerbates hesitancy. Promising interventions, such as immersive virtual reality experiences, financial incentives, and political endorsements, offer avenues to mitigate hesitancy and enhance vaccine uptake. Furthermore, the pivotal role of healthcare professionals in promoting vaccination and combatting misinformation underscores the importance of leveraging trust and expertise to shape public perceptions. Employer recommendations and tailored educational initiatives emerge as practical strategies to encourage vaccine acceptance within communities. This review underscores the imperative for targeted interventions grounded in evidence-based practices to address vaccine hesitancy effectively and safeguard public health in the face of evolving challenges.

Introduction

Vaccination stands as a powerful shield against the constant threat of diseases, exemplified by the triumph over polio, a testament to its protective prowess. Integral to healthcare, immunization is essential for maintaining good health. Rooted in evidence-based practices, medicine strongly supports vaccination. However, despite extensive evidence, pockets of vaccine hesitancy endure, often fueled by misinformation and misunderstandings.

Each instance of hesitancy, however, has been dismantled by the robust foundation of evidence-based medicine. The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic ushered in accelerated vaccine development, sparking controversies, and seeding doubts about vaccine efficacy. Presently, skepticism towards COVID-19 vaccines lingers, perpetuating a disquieting trend that may spill over to other vaccines, exacerbating existing hesitancies.

In response to these challenges, this review article attempts to investigate into this distinctive predicament, aiming to provide practical recommendations to combat vaccine hesitancy. The year 2020 witnessed the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic as a significant global health crisis, unleashing a myriad of challenges that reverberated across populations worldwide. In the face of this crisis, the development and dissemination of the COVID-19 vaccine assumed a pivotal role in combating the spread of the virus [1]. Scientific evidence overwhelmingly supports the efficacy of vaccines in mitigating complications and hospitalizations [2], thereby safeguarding countless lives [3]. However, amid these efforts, concerns have arisen regarding vaccine hesitancy among the public.

Individuals who once adhered to routine vaccinations, such as the annual influenza vaccine, may now harbor reservations due to the proliferation of misinformation surrounding the COVID-19 vaccine [4]. This article investigates into the intricate interplay between the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccine hesitancy, studying whether the introduction of the COVID-19 vaccine has reshaped public attitudes towards vaccinations in general. It is imperative to underscore that this exploration not only encompasses attitudes towards the COVID-19 vaccine but also extends to the broader spectrum of vaccines.

Methods

A systematic review of literature was performed ranging from 2021 to 2023 using PubMed, Medline, and Cochrane databases. Articles were included and excluded in the research process based on relevance and cross-sectional studies applicable to multiple countries. The screening process was established on the premise of willingness or hesitancy of getting vaccinated and the underlying socio-demographic factors influencing vaccination hesitancy. Articles were reviewed using titles and abstracts, focusing primarily on COVID-19 leading to vaccine hesitancy. The selected articles were then further assessed to assure generalizability to the public.

Results

The literature search yielded a comprehensive overview, comprising 151 articles from PubMed, 29 articles from Medline, and 42 articles from the Cochrane database. No duplications were detected within the retrieved literature, resulting in a total of 222 articles for review. Following our screening, articles were either excluded or included based on their relevance to the primary topic. Ultimately, 78 articles met the inclusion criteria and underwent further analysis. Among these articles, a prevailing theme emerged regarding the dynamics of vaccine acceptance versus hesitancy. A notable majority, comprising 51 articles, indicated that the willingness to receive vaccination outweighed hesitancy [5, 6]. The vaccine hesitancy appeared to be more pronounced during the initial stages of the pandemic when COVID-19 was still considered novel. However, after some time, individuals showed increased receptiveness towards vaccine acceptance. Furthermore, all 78 articles unanimously identified misinformation from media sources or limited knowledge regarding vaccines and the COVID-19 pandemic as primary causes of vaccine hesitancy. Delving deeper into socio demographic influences, 28 articles underscored the role of factors such as gender, age, occupation, past medical history, and race in inducing vaccine hesitancy [7]. Notably, individuals belonging to high-income brackets, middle-aged males, married individuals with access to healthcare coverage, and those without previous chronic illnesses were more inclined to get vaccinated [8]. Moreover, findings from 24 articles suggested that individuals working in the healthcare sector exhibited higher willingness to promote and receive vaccinations [9]. Several articles

distinguished individuals being more receptive towards influenza vaccination at the peak of the pandemic [10]. Individuals were more inclined to receive an influenza vaccination amid the pandemic, however post pandemic rates of influenza vaccinations declined [10]. Nevertheless, influenza vaccinations were still notably higher than that of COVID-19 vaccinations [11].

Further analysis revealed intriguing insights into interventions aimed at mitigating vaccine hesitancy and enhancing vaccine uptake [12]. One study highlighted the efficacy of immersive virtual reality (VR) experiences in simulating the collective benefits of community immunity, thereby significantly increasing vaccination intentions. This suggests the potential of VR as a powerful tool in public health efforts, particularly in combating vaccine misinformation [13]. Moreover, research addressing purity concerns from scientific and religious perspectives positively influenced attitudes towards vaccines and vaccination intentions, particularly among conservative populations in the U.S [14]. This underscores the importance of considering moral and psychological factors in designing effective vaccination campaigns. Additionally, research highlights just how much political figures can sway public health decisions. For instance, a study found that when former President Donald Trump endorsed the vaccine, it markedly increased the willingness of his unvaccinated followers to get vaccinated. This reveals how deeply political identity can influence personal health choices, emphasizing the significant role political leaders have in guiding the health behaviors of their supporters. It was also found that behavioral interventions such as personalized text reminders were found to be effective in increasing vaccination rates by addressing scheduling barriers and fostering a sense of personal ownership over the vaccine [15]. In light of these findings, it becomes evident that tailored and comprehensive approaches are imperative to address vaccine hesitancy and enhance vaccine uptake. Some studies have shown that financial incentives, such as a \$1000 cash incentive, can significantly boost vaccine willingness, with employer mandates proving to be particularly effective in encouraging vaccination among unvaccinated individuals in the U.S [16]. These interventions underscore the necessity of integrating diverse strategies to combat vaccine hesitancy and promote public health initiatives effectively.

Perception	Number of Supporting Articles
Willingness to receive vaccination outweighed hesitancy	51
Positive association between affiliation with individuals in the healthcare field and willingness to receive vaccinations	4
The influence of age, gender, education level, income, occupation, medical history, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and access to healthcare on vaccine acceptance	28

Table 1: Perceptions regarding exclusively the COVID-19 vaccine.

Perception	Number of Supporting Articles
Increase in willingness to accept influenza vaccinations during the COVID-19 pandemic	7

Table 2: Perceptions regarding other vaccines (other than COVID-19).

Perception	Number of Supporting Articles
Misinformation from media sources sparking vaccine hesitancy	78
Willingness of healthcare professionals to receive and promote vaccinations	24

Table 3: Perceptions regarding all vaccines (COVID-19 and other).

Discussion

The study highlights that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected willingness to receive vaccinations, sparking a sense of hesitancy or reluctance. Sociodemographic factors such as race, age, gender, medical history, socio-economic status, and access to healthcare, were found to influence receptiveness to vaccinations. Moreover, identifying as female or an ethnic minority, living among a rural population, restricted access to education, and health insurance were all factors found to be correlated with elevated vaccine hesitancy. Based on these findings, it can be postulated that receiving adequate education regarding healthcare, promotes the significance of

vaccines on preventing future illness, subsequently increasing willingness for vaccine uptake [17]. Individuals with a history of chronic illness may be more at risk for developing life-threatening conditions, which could potentially be prevented through the acceptance of vaccinations [8]. It's highly plausible that the fear of developing comorbid illnesses drives vaccine acceptance. Furthermore, seven articles found that there was a spike in influenza vaccinations, amid the pandemic which can be attributed to avoidance of secondary respiratory illness onset. Four articles have identified a positive correlation between associating with individuals in the healthcare sector and being more inclined to accept vaccinations. This link likely stems from the fact that healthcare workers possess greater knowledge of health literature and have access to trustworthy information sources. Similarly, findings from research indicated that incentivizing vaccinations drastically elevated vaccine uptake, which could be due to individuals feeling that they're monetarily gaining or "winning" something for receiving vaccinations. Additionally, political figures endorsement of vaccinations, specifically President Trump's, significantly influences constituents to get vaccinated. Moreover, this insinuates the power media and political figures hold in vaccine acceptance.

Within this discussion section, several key points merit elaborations. Initially, during the pandemic, there was a notable increase in individuals opting for influenza vaccinations. However, subsequent to the pandemic, rates of influenza vaccinations experienced a decline [10]. This finding underscores the need for further investigation. It is imperative that future research endeavors delve into this matter. Conducting comprehensive studies on populations' acceptance and refusal of influenza vaccines before, during, and after the pandemic may yield valuable insights. Moreover, if the COVID-19 vaccine has contributed to heightened hesitancy towards other vaccines, including influenza vaccines, it is crucial to devise a strategic plan for public education.

All 78 articles meeting the inclusion criteria have tackled the issue of misinformation, which has worsened vaccine hesitancy. This observation carries significant weight, given that misinformation poses a substantial threat to both the healthcare system and individual well-being. It's imperative to focus efforts on educating individuals who spread misinformation about evidence-based medicine and discerning between accurate information and falsehoods. Recent literature suggests that VR stands as a potent tool in public health initiatives, particularly in combating the dissemination of vaccine misinformation. Exploring and potentially incorporating the benefits of VR in vaccination campaigns could be a promising avenue for further exploration.

Given that influencers like politicians can impact vaccine hesitancy and acceptance, it's crucial for them to rely on evidence-based medicine and convey factual information. This approach shows promise in fostering greater vaccine acceptance within the population.

The discovery that a \$1000 cash incentive can significantly increase vaccine willingness [16] is intriguing. While it's impractical to provide financial incentives to every vaccine recipient, understanding that such incentives can enhance vaccine acceptance is noteworthy. Exploring alternative methods, like personalized health education tailored to individuals, could sway some from vaccine denial to acceptance. These one-on-one educational sessions, conducted by healthcare professionals such as nurses or vaccine educators investing ample time, could be effective. Moreover, hosting small seminars and forming educational groups about specific vaccines could be beneficial.

Employer mandates have proven particularly effective in encouraging vaccination among the unvaccinated in the U.S. To avoid discontent among employees and conflicts, these mandates should be implemented amicably, perhaps transitioning from mandates to recommendations. Furthermore, integrating vaccine education into employee wellness programs, which many employees appreciate, is a practical strategy to boost vaccine acceptance. Twenty-four articles highlighted that healthcare professionals are willing to receive and promote vaccinations. Their support is invaluable, and the public should be encouraged to consult their trusted healthcare providers regarding vaccine recommendations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this review sheds light on the intricate relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccine hesitancy, offering valuable insights into the factors influencing public attitudes towards vaccination. Despite the overwhelming evidence supporting the efficacy and importance of vaccines, pockets of hesitancy persist, fueled by misinformation and socio-demographic disparities. The

study underscores the need for targeted interventions to address these challenges effectively.

Key findings suggest that sociodemographic factors such as race, age, gender, and socioeconomic status significantly influence vaccine acceptance. Additionally, the role of misinformation from media sources and limited knowledge about vaccines emerges as primary drivers of hesitancy. However, promising interventions, such as immersive virtual reality experiences, financial incentives, and political endorsements, offer avenues to mitigate hesitancy and enhance vaccine uptake.

Moreover, the study highlights the crucial role of healthcare professionals in promoting vaccination and combating misinformation. Leveraging their trust and expertise could significantly impact public perceptions and behaviors regarding vaccination. Furthermore, employer mandates and tailored educational initiatives emerge as practical strategies to encourage vaccine acceptance within communities.

Moving forward, it is imperative to continue research efforts to understand the evolving landscape of vaccine hesitancy and to develop comprehensive, evidence-based interventions. By addressing the underlying factors driving hesitancy and leveraging innovative approaches, we can collectively work towards achieving widespread vaccine acceptance and safeguarding public health.

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