

Vaccination on the Internet:

A Qualitative Analysis of Website Discourses

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Introduction

US parents searching the Internet to inform themselves about childhood vaccination commonly encounter conflicting information. Typically, government agencies and medical organizations sponsor websites promoting vaccination, and advocacy groups sponsor vaccine-skeptical messages.

In our study, we looked at a range of websites concerning vaccination and examined the appeals they used to address visitors, persuasive strategies, and dominant themes. We looked at the first step of the persuasive process, which is conveying messages to the public.

Methods

The Vaccination Research Group looked at a sampling of websites to examine how they use discourse to persuade viewers.

First, we broadly outlined the strategies each website used. Next, we used thick description, an anthropological data acquisition method of systematic observation, to examine the ways each website conveyed information to the reader. We collected data in five categories, including user experience, navigation, eye-catching features, language use, and evidence. After this step, we attempted to synthesize this information in a way that compared each vaccination website.

Results

The websites differ in the way they convey information. Websites promoting vaccination use scientific evidence as their primary strategy. Vaccine-skeptical websites use a variety of strategies, some based on science and others based on personal narratives. The vaccine-skeptical websites are more invested in forming a community for their users, and vaccine-positive websites emphasize disseminating evidence-based information. Vaccine-skeptical websites encourage user participation, while websites promoting vaccination only act as authorities to disseminate science.

The comparison of these websites gave us insight into how they encourage different user experiences through the emphasis of different forms of evidence.

National Vaccine Information Center

Fosters a grassroots vaccine-skeptical movement, commanding users to join the fight against vaccination.

Vaccines.gov

Emphasizes that ideal citizens should be vaccinated to protect themselves, their families, and their communities.

Vaccine Education Center, CHOP

Emphasizes risks and benefits of vaccination, with the benefits always outweighing the risks.

SaneVax

Creates a community through victim narratives and presents vaccine-skeptical information through personal accounts and posts by members.

