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Strategies to Promote COVID-19 Vaccinations in the United States. A Content Analysis of the „We Can Do This” Campaign Videos

**Strategie promowania szczepień przeciw COVID-19 w Stanach Zjednoczonych.
Analiza zawartości spotów z kampanii „We Can Do This”**

Abstract

In response to COVID-19 vaccine resistance, U.S. states implemented numerous incentives to increase vaccination rates. In addition to financial and non-cash prizes, COVID-19 vaccinations were also promoted through education campaigns. The aim of this article is to analyse the persuasive strategies used in the “We Can Do This” campaign videos to encourage vaccination uptake and examine whether these techniques were effective considering the research on COVID-19 vaccine messaging. The paper analysed 70 campaign videos from 2021 using quantitative and qualitative content analysis. The study found that the videos employed a range of effective persuasion strategies to promote COVID-19 vaccines. Differences and similarities between the most and least viewed spots were also explored.

Keywords

COVID-19 vaccines, education campaigns, vaccine hesitancy, United States, „We Can Do This”, COVID-19 pandemic, content analysis

Abstrakt

W odpowiedzi na opór wobec szczepień przeciw COVID-19 w stanach USA stosowano liczne zachęty, by zwiększyć poziom wyszczepienia. Oprócz nagród finansowych i niepieniężnych, szczepienia przeciw COVID-19 były również promowane poprzez kampanie edukacyjne. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest analiza strategii perswazyjnych wykorzystanych w spotach kampanii „We Can Do This”, by zachęcić odbiorców do szczepień, oraz zbadanie, czy techniki te były skuteczne w świetle badań nad przekazami dotyczącymi szczepionek przeciw COVID-19. W pracy przeanalizowano 70 spotów z 2021 roku z wykorzystaniem ilościowej i jakościowej analizy zawartości. Badanie wykazało, że w filmach zastosowano szereg skutecznych strategii perswazyjnych, by promować szczepienia przeciw COVID-19. Autor zbadał również różnice i podobieństwa pomiędzy najczęściej i najrzadziej oglądanymi spotami.

Słowa kluczowe

szczepionki przeciw COVID-19, kampanie edukacyjne, niechęć do szczepień, Stany Zjednoczone, „We Can Do This”, pandemia COVID-19, analiza zawartości

Introduction

The first COVID-19 vaccination outside of a clinical trial was given in the United States on the 14th of December 2020¹. By the 28th of December 2022, 80,8% of the U.S. population was estimated to have received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine and 69% was estimated to be fully vaccinated against the disease². In contrast, Australia and Canada currently have almost 83% of their population fully vaccinated³.

Although COVID-19 vaccination has saved millions of lives, as estimated by Watson et al.,⁴ vaccine hesitancy still exists in the U.S. population. According to Morning Consult's surveys conducted between 6-12 December 2022, 22% of respondents (U.S. adults) do not intend to receive the vaccine, while the other 6% is unsure whether they will vaccinate⁵.

The reasons why U.S. residents did not want to vaccinate against COVID-19 have been changing over time. According to an Ipsos survey for The World Economic Forum conducted in December 2020, 57% of the responses showed that the main reason for people refusing the vaccination was concern about side effects⁶. The other five responses given by U.S. respondents were: "I don't think it will be effective" (24%), "I'm not enough at risk from COVID-19" (21%), "I am against vaccines in general" (19%) and "I don't have the time" (6%)⁷. 22% of the survey participants provided other reasons⁸.

The results of an Ipsos survey for The World Economic Forum conducted in January 2021 revealed significant changes in views of vaccine hesitant Americans. Although concern about side effects remained the No. 1 reason for not wanting

¹ B. Guarino, A.E. Cha, J. Wood, G. Witte, *The weapon that will end the war': First coronavirus vaccine shots given outside trials in U.S.*, "The Washington Post", 14.12.2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/12/14/first-covid-vaccines-new-york/> (accessed 5.12.2022).

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *COVID-19 Vaccinations in the United States*, https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#vaccinations_vacc-people-booster-percent-pop5 (accessed 2.01.2023).

³ Our World in Data, *Coronavirus (COVID-19) Vaccinations*, <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations> (accessed 2.01.2023). Data as of 22 December 2022 for Australia and 30 December 2022 for Canada.

⁴ O.J. Watson, G. Barnsley, J. Toor, A.B. Hogan, P. Winskill, A.C. Ghani, *Global impact of the first year of COVID-19 vaccination: a mathematical modelling study*, "The Lancet Infectious Diseases" 2022, 22(9), pp. 1293-1302. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099\(22\)00320-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099(22)00320-6)

⁵ J. Coleman, *Over A Quarter of Americans Report Vaccine Skepticism*, "Morning Consult", <https://morningconsult.com/covid19-vaccine-dashboard/> (accessed 2.01.2023).

⁶ Ipsos, *Global Attitudes On A COVID-19 Vaccine*, 2020, p. 4, <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2020-12/global-attitudes-on-a-covid-19-vaccine-december-2020-report.pdf> (accessed 15.11.2022).

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ Ibidem.

to get vaccinated (36% of responses), the second most commonly stated answer was: “I am worried that a vaccine is moving through clinical trials too fast” (26% of responses)⁹. Another two answers – “I am against vaccines in general” and “The risk to me of getting COVID-19 is low” – were selected by 11% of respondents each¹⁰. 8% of the survey participants doubted the effectiveness of the vaccine, 9% provided other reasons¹¹.

Further changes in vaccine hesitancy attitudes were showed by The Economist/YouGov Poll conducted in September 2021. Concern about side effects was again the most frequently cited reason for not getting a COVID-19 vaccine (28% of responses)¹². The next three most popular answers, however, revealed a close relationship between vaccine hesitancy and lack of public trust. 22% of respondents chose the answer “Don’t trust government”, 10% – “Don’t trust any vaccines”, 9% – “Don’t trust drug companies”¹³. Further three reasons – “Haven’t had the time to get vaccinated”, “COVID vaccines don’t work” and “Don’t think I’m personally likely to contract COVID” – were cited by 8% of respondents each¹⁴. 6% admitted that they had already had COVID¹⁵.

Incentives for COVID-19 vaccine promotion

In response to vaccine refusal, governments and businesses across the world implemented numerous incentives to increase vaccination rates. To encourage COVID-19 vaccination, people were offered cash prizes,¹⁶ free flights, accommodation and fuel,¹⁷

⁹ Ipsos, *Global Attitudes On A COVID-19 Vaccine*, 2021, p. 4, <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/Global-attitudes-on-a-COVID-19-Vaccine-January-2021-report%20.pdf> (accessed 15.11.2022).

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² The Economist/YouGov, *The Economist/YouGov Poll, September 26 – 28, 2021 – 1500 U.S. Adult Citizens*, p. 34, <https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/ab8vvo6g3z/econTabReport.pdf> (accessed 15.11.2022). The percentage points cited in this paragraph are for the “total” category. For the breakdown of results in other categories, see p. 34 of the report.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ C. MacLean, *COVID-19 vaccine lottery winners say there are more reasons to get immunized than a \$100K prize*, “CBC News”, 17.08.2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/vax-to-win-manitoba-covid-19-vaccine-lottery-1.6143477> (accessed 3.01.2023); Polish Press Agency, *Poland launches lottery to promote Covid-19 vaccinations*, 1.07.2021, <https://www.pap.pl/en/news/news%2C902316%2Cpoland-launches-lottery-promote-covid-19-vaccinations.html> (accessed 6.12.2022).

¹⁷ S. Borys, *Qantas to offer free flights, accommodation and fuel as incentive for Australians to receive COVID-19 vaccine*, “ABC NEWS”, 22.08.2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-08-23/qantas-offer-travel-incentives-to-australians-covid-vaccine/100398230> (accessed 6.12.2022).

discounts on meals,¹⁸ Euro 2020 tickets,¹⁹ jewellery and kitchen accessories,²⁰ shopping vouchers, travel gift cards and bus tickets,²¹ and animals,²² to name just a few examples.

In the United States, incentives for COVID-19 vaccinations varied by state and included, among other things, cash prizes, gift cards, complimentary drinks, concert, game and race tickets, free admission to amusement parks and museums, scholarships, fishing licences, parking, subway and ski resorts passes, weekend gateways, freebies, state park passes, trucks, pontoon boats, free gas, football and basketball season tickets²³.

In addition to material or financial incentives, COVID-19 vaccinations were also encouraged through education campaigns. These include, among others, the Ad Council and COVID Collaborative's "It's Up to You" Campaign, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) "We Can Do This" campaign.

COVID-19 vaccine messaging

COVID-19 vaccine messaging has been the subject of several studies since the start of the pandemic²⁴. The following is a brief overview of recent literature on

¹⁸ Ch. Hope, *Shopping vouchers and pizza discounts to boost vaccinations among the young*, "The Telegraph", 1.08.2021, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/07/31/shopping-vouchers-pizza-discounts-boost-vaccinations-among-young/> (accessed 6.12.2022).

¹⁹ BBC News, *Covid-19: Euro 2020 tickets offered as part of vaccine push*, 6.07.2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-57732002> (accessed 6.12.2022).

²⁰ hindustantimes.com, *Covid-19: Locals get gold nose pin, hand blender at a vaccine camp in Gujarat's Rajkot*, "Hindustan Times", 4.04.2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/covid19-gold-nose-pin-hand-blender-for-those-who-take-vaccine-in-gujarat-s-rajkot-101617514147403.html> (accessed 6.12.2022).

²¹ GOV.UK, *More leading businesses join vaccine uptake drive*, 16.08.2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/more-leading-businesses-join-vaccine-uptake-drive> (accessed 6.12.2022).

²² Reuters, *Chickens, cows, apartments offered up in Asia's vaccination lucky draws*, 16.06.2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/chickens-cows-apartments-offered-up-asias-vaccination-lucky-draws-2021-06-16/> (accessed 6.12.2022).

²³ National Governors Association, *COVID-19 Vaccine Incentives*, 19.10.2021, <https://www.nga.org/publications/covid-19-vaccine-incentives/> (accessed 6.12.2022).

²⁴ T.C. Davis, R. Beyl, M.A. N. Bhuiyan, A.B. Davis, J.A. Vanchiere, M.S. Wolf, C.L. Arnold, *COVID-19 Concerns, Vaccine Acceptance and Trusted Sources of Information among Patients Cared for in a Safety-Net Health System*, "Vaccines" 2022, 10(6), 928, pp. 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.3390/vaccines10060928>; M. Ashworth, L. Thunström, T.L. Cherry, S.C. Newbold, D.C. Finnoff, *Emphasize personal health benefits to boost COVID-19 vaccination rates*, "Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences" 2021, 118(32), e2108225118, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2108225118>; Civis Analytics, *The remaining mile: How do you persuade uncertain Americans to get vaccinated against COVID-19?*, <https://www.civisanalytics.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Creative-Focus-Vaccine-Message-Test-Summer-2021.pdf> (accessed 15.11.2022); Civis Analytics, *Made to Save, How do you persuade*

the effectiveness of vaccine safety messages, fear appeals, messages emphasising personal benefits from vaccination and the types of trusted sources of COVID-19 vaccine information. As the effectiveness of vaccine messages has been changing over 2021,²⁵ and the aim of the article is to analyse the campaign videos uploaded in 2021, the literature review focuses primarily (with some exceptions for comparison purposes) on studies conducted after the start of the vaccination programme.

Messages on vaccine safety

Interestingly, although concern about the side effects was the most frequently expressed reason for refusing vaccination in the United States in December 2020,²⁶ January 2021²⁷ and September 2021²⁸, messages emphasising the safety of COVID-19 vaccines proved ineffective in the online randomised controlled trial conducted between April 28 and May 3, 2021,²⁹ and likely to lower vaccination likelihood in the study conducted between August 19 and September 8, 2021³⁰. Vaccine safety messages were also not significantly effective in the study conducted before the widespread availability of vaccines³¹.

uncertain Americans to get vaccinated against COVID-19?, <https://www.civisanalytics.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/April-2021-Vaccine-Message-Test-from-Civis-Analytics.pdf> (accessed 15.11.2022); D. Freeman, B.S. Loe, L.-M. Yu, J. Freeman, A. Chadwick, C. Vaccari, M. Shanyinde, V. Harris, F. Waite, L. Rosebrock, A. Petit, S. Vanderslott, S. Lewandowsky, M. Larkin, S. Innocenti, A.J. Pollard, H. McShane, S. Lambe, *Effects of different types of written vaccination information on COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy in the UK (OCEANS-III): a single-blind, parallel-group, randomised controlled trial*, "The Lancet Public Health" 2021, 6(6), E416-E427. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(21\)00096-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(21)00096-7); R.S. Purvis, E. Hallgren, R.A. Moore, D.E. Willis, S. Hall, M. Gurel-Headley, P.A. McElfish, *Trusted Sources of COVID-19 Vaccine Information among Hesitant Adopters in the United States*. "Vaccines" 2021, 9(12), 1418, pp. 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.3390/vaccines9121418>; A.A. Malik, S.M. McFadden, J. Elharake, S.B. Omer, *Determinants of COVID-19 vaccine acceptance in the US*, "EclinicalMedicine" 2020, 26, 100495, pp. 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eclinm.2020.100495>

²⁵ See Civis Analytics, *Made to Save*, op. cit. (accessed 15.11.2022), Civis Analytics, op. cit. (accessed 15.11.2022).

²⁶ Ipsos, 2020, op. cit., p. 4 (accessed 15.11.2022).

²⁷ Ipsos, 2021, op. cit., p. 4 (accessed 15.11.2022).

²⁸ The Economist/YouGov, op. cit., p. 34 (accessed 15.11.2022).

²⁹ Civis Analytics, *Made to Save*, op. cit. (accessed 15.11.2022). On average.

³⁰ Civis Analytics, op. cit. (accessed 15.11.2022). On average. The report also presents the results on the effectiveness of vaccine safety message by subgroups not described here. See the report for full findings.

³¹ M. Ashworth, L. Thunström, T.L. Cherry, S.C. Newbold, D.C. Finnoff, op. cit.

Fear appeals

Fear-based appeals have also proven unsuccessful in convincing the unvaccinated³². Message highlighting the dangers posed by COVID-19 increased likelihood to vaccinate by only 1 percentage point on average in the spring of 2021,³³ and decreased vaccination likelihood by 3 percentage points on average in the August/September study³⁴. Another message, a fear-based personal story, lowered vaccination likelihood by 2 percentage points on average in early 2021³⁵ and by 4 percentage points on average in the August/September study³⁶.

Messages about benefits from vaccination

Messages about individual benefits from vaccination have proven persuasive in COVID-19 vaccine communication, studies showed. A UK randomised controlled trial found that information highlighting personal benefit of COVID vaccination was more effective in lowering vaccine hesitancy in the strongly hesitant group than information emphasising collective benefits³⁷. Similarly, the message about private health benefits of vaccinating had the largest effect on intended vaccinations in a study conducted in the United States before the widespread availability of vaccines³⁸.

³² Civis Analytics, Made to Save, op. cit. (accessed 15.11.2022); Civis Analytics, op. cit. (accessed 15.11.2022).

³³ Civis Analytics, Made to Save, op. cit. (accessed 15.11.2022). The author refers here to the message called "Scary COVID Statistics". For the full definition of what the message covers see the report.

³⁴ Civis Analytics, op. cit. (accessed 15.11.2022). The author refers here to the message called "Scary COVID Statistics". For the full definition of what the message covers see the report. Civis Analytics also presents the results on the effectiveness of the "Scary COVID Statistics" message by subgroups not described here. See the report for full findings.

³⁵ Civis Analytics, Made to Save, op. cit. (accessed 15.11.2022). The author refers here to the message called "Personal Story". For the full definition of what the message covers see the report. Civis Analytics, Made to Save also present the results on the effectiveness of the "Personal Story" message by subgroups not described here. See the report for full findings.

³⁶ Civis Analytics, op. cit. (accessed 15.11.2022). The author refers here to the message called "Personal Story". For the full definition of what the message covers see the report. Civis Analytics also presents the results on the effectiveness of the "Personal Story" message by subgroups not described here. See the report for full findings.

³⁷ D. Freeman, B.S. Loe, L.-M. Yu, J. Freeman, A. Chadwick, C. Vaccari, M. Shanyinde, V. Harris, F. Waite, L. Rosebrock, A. Petit, S. Vanderslott, S. Lewandowsky, M. Larkin, S. Innocenti, A.J. Pollard, H. McShane, S. Lambe, op. cit.

³⁸ M. Ashworth, L. Thunström, T.L. Cherry, S.C. Newbold, D.C. Finnoff, op. cit.

Trusted sources of COVID-19 vaccine information

Researchers also examined the relationship between COVID-19 vaccine information and trust. In a study of Purvis et al. conducted between 22 April 2021 and 6 July 2021, 50.2% of respondents (hesitant adopters in the United States) cited health care and medical science as trusted sources of information about the COVID-19 vaccine³⁹. Within this group, 36.3% of the participants identified health care providers as a trusted source of their vaccine information, 13.9% of the respondents said the same about public health organisations and leaders⁴⁰. Comparatively, news and social media were reported as trusted sources of information by only 16.4% of the study participants⁴¹.

Another study, conducted between February and October 2021, found that 79.7% of Louisiana patients had the most trust in COVID-19 vaccine information from physicians⁴². Federal agencies (CDC/FDA) were the second most trusted source of information (52.0%), while local newspapers or TV were trusted by only 25.0% of the respondents⁴³.

Similar results were observed before the widespread availability of COVID-19 vaccines. In a May 2020 study, healthcare professionals and health officials were reported “the most reliable sources of information on COVID-19” by 75% and 70% of U.S. respondents, respectively⁴⁴. In contrast, social media were reliable for only 21% of the survey participants⁴⁵.

Methodology

The aim of this paper is to identify the strategies used in the “We Can Do This” campaign videos to encourage COVID-19 vaccinations in the United States in 2021 and examine whether these techniques were effective considering the research on COVID-19 vaccine messaging. According to Gallup’s study, Americans’ trust in the federal government’s handling international and domestic issues was only at 39% in 2021⁴⁶. It is therefore interesting to examine how the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ campaign educated on a topic that to this day remains controversial for many.

³⁹ R.S. Purvis, E. Hallgren, R.A. Moore, D.E. Willis, S. Hall, M. Gurel-Headley, P.A. McElfish, op. cit., p. 5.

⁴⁰ Ibidem., p. 6.

⁴¹ Ibidem., p. 5.

⁴² T.C. Davis, R. Beyl, M.A. N. Bhuiyan, A.B. Davis, J.A. Vanchiere, M.S. Wolf, C.L. Arnold, op. cit., p. 4.

⁴³ Ibidem. For results by subgroups see pp. 4-5.

⁴⁴ A.A. Malik, S.M. McFadden, J. Elharake, S.B. Omer, op. cit., p. 3.

⁴⁵ Ibidem.

⁴⁶ M. Brennan, *Americans’ Trust in Government Remains Low*, “Gallup”, 30.09.2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/355124/americans-trust-government-remains-low.aspx> (accessed 5.01.2023).

Research questions

The three main research questions addressed in the paper are:

- RQ1: What persuasion strategies were used in the “We Can Do This” campaign videos to promote COVID-19 vaccinations in the United States?
- RQ2: Were the strategies used effective considering the research on COVID-19 vaccine messaging?
- RQ3: What characterises the most and least watched campaign spots?

Hypotheses

The research on COVID-19 vaccine messaging forms the basis for the following five hypotheses:

- H1: Information on COVID-19 vaccine safety appears in less than half of the sample.
- H2: Videos more often use the arguments emphasising the benefits of vaccinating and/or the positive aspects of COVID-19 vaccine/vaccination procedure than present the negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- H3: COVID-19 survivor stories and nurses’ stories from the pandemic cover less than one-fifth of the sample.
- H4: The arguments most frequently used in the videos are those that emphasise the personal benefits of getting vaccinated against COVID-19.
- H5: At least one-third of the campaign videos features medical experts.

Sample

The process of selecting the sample took place on the 25th of November 2022 and consisted of four stages. First, four playlists with the campaign-related content were found on the official channel of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services on YouTube⁴⁷: “We Can Do This”, “Young Adults and COVID-19 Vaccines”, “Parents and COVID-19 Vaccines” and “Trusted Voices/COVID-19 Vaccine Q&A”. The playlists included 371 films⁴⁸.

In the second step, the author narrowed the sample using three criteria: date of publication (1 April – 31 December 2021),⁴⁹ language (videos entirely in English) and duration of videos (up to 5 minutes in length). In total: 142 videos.

⁴⁷ Official channel of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services on YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/@HHS> (accessed 25.11.2022).

⁴⁸ As of 25 November 2022. The author is not aware if any of the videos were removed before 25 November 2022 or after 3 December 2022 when viewing figures were checked.

⁴⁹ The first „We Can Do This” TV ads appeared in April 2021 (N. DeFeudis, *HHS renews ‚call to action’ with Covid booster ad spots*, “Endpoints News”, 1.11.2022, <https://endpts.com/hhs-renews-call-to->

Then, to avoid coding the same films multiple times, if a video was featured in two or more playlists, the author counted it as one. If a video was available in different time variants,⁵⁰ selected for analysis was the version with the highest number of views. In total: 73 videos.

In the last step, the author excluded from the analysis a video targeting those already vaccinated (“Surgeon General Delta Variant Message for Vaccinated People”) and two films about COVID-19 boosters (“COVID Vaccine Fast Facts: Booster Shots” and “Free Gift – :15”). Eventually, 70 campaign videos were selected for analysis.

Research method and code categories

70 campaign videos were analysed through quantitative and qualitative content analysis. The coding sheet created by the author consisted of six sections. The first one coded for the descriptive characteristics of the videos such as: title, month of publication, length and number of views.

The second section coded for the types of arguments for COVID-19 vaccination that were used in the videos. These included: protection against COVID-19 infection/hospitalisation/death, protecting family and/or children, protecting other people or communities, getting vaccinated can help us get back to “normal”, vaccines are safe, vaccines have been thoroughly evaluated in clinical trials/vaccine data have been thoroughly evaluated, vaccines are effective, millions of Americans have already received the vaccine, vaccines are free, vaccinations are easily accessible, getting vaccinated will help to stop the pandemic, COVID-19 vaccine has been approved by FDA, protection against severe disease and other.

The third section listed the negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic which were presented visually or mentioned verbally in the videos. The list included: death/the risk of dying, hospitalisation/the risk of being hospitalised, severe COVID-19, the rising number of COVID-19 cases, lockdown/social distancing, long/difficult to treat COVID-19 symptoms, disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Black and/or Latinx communities, exhaustion of healthcare workers and other.

The fourth section coded for the presence of health experts in the films. These included physicians, public health professionals, scientists, nurses and pharmacists. The author noted whether they appeared in the videos, and if so, whether they addressed common concerns about possible COVID-19 vaccine side effects. Videos addressing the concerns without the presence of health experts were also counted.

-action-with-covid-booster-ad-spots/, accessed 4.01.2022), therefore, the author decided to analyse videos published on YouTube between April and December 2021 not January and December 2021.

⁵⁰ Refers to videos that had the same content/title, but were available in different lengths.

The fifth section coded for COVID-19 survivor stories and nurses' stories from the pandemic. In the sixth and final section of the coding sheet, the author noted whether the flag of the United States, COVID-19 vaccine recipients and three types of nonverbal communication (smiling, hugging and cheek kissing) appeared in the films.

Results

Hypothesis 1

Arguments that have been classified as those that highlight the vaccine safety include: vaccines are safe (present in 18 videos), COVID-19 vaccine has been approved by FDA (6), millions of Americans have already received the vaccine (5), vaccines have been thoroughly evaluated in clinical trials/vaccine data have been thoroughly evaluated (4) and other (2). 19 films addressed common concerns about possible COVID-19 vaccine side effects.

In total, 31 videos (approx. 44% of the sample) featured at least one argument about the safety of COVID-19 vaccines and/or addressed public concerns. This result allows to confirm the first hypothesis: information on COVID-19 vaccine safety appears in less than half of the sample.

Hypothesis 2

Arguments emphasising the benefits of vaccinating and/or the positive aspects of COVID-19 vaccine/vaccination procedure appeared in the videos in the following order (from most to least used): protection against COVID-19 infection/hospitalisation/death (27 videos), vaccines are safe (18), other (13), vaccines are effective (12), getting vaccinated can help us get back to "normal" (8), protecting family and/or children (7), vaccinations are easily accessible (7), COVID-19 vaccine has been approved by FDA (6), protection against severe disease (6), protecting other people or communities (5), vaccines are free (5), millions of Americans have already received the vaccine (5), vaccines have been thoroughly evaluated in clinical trials/vaccine data have been thoroughly evaluated (4), getting vaccinated will help to stop the pandemic (4). In total, arguments appeared 127 times.

Negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic were mentioned or presented in the videos in the following order (from most to least frequently appearing): death/the risk of dying (14 videos), hospitalisation/the risk of being hospitalised (12), severe COVID-19 (11), other (7), the rising number of COVID-19 cases (6), lockdown/social distancing (5), long/difficult to treat COVID-19 symptoms (5), disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Black and/or Latinx communities (5), exhaustion of healthcare workers (2). In total, negative effects were shown or mentioned 67 times.

55 videos (approx. 79% of the sample) included at least one argument highlighting the benefits of vaccinating and/or the positive aspects of the vaccine/vaccination procedure. The negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic were mentioned or presented in 35 videos (50% of the sample).

These results allow to confirm the second hypothesis: videos more often use the arguments emphasising the benefits of vaccinating and/or the positive aspects of COVID-19 vaccine/ vaccination procedure than present the negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hypothesis 3

Of the 70 videos, only 4 were COVID-19 survivor stories or nurses' stories (approx. 6% of the sample). Interestingly, 3 of these 4 spots ("COVID-19 Survivor Story: Terrell – :30", "COVID-19 Survivor Story: Kole", "COVID-19 Survivor Story: Amanda – :30") received the most views among the videos selected for analysis⁵¹.

Hypothesis 3 is confirmed: COVID-19 survivor stories and nurses' stories from the pandemic cover less than one-fifth of the sample.

Hypothesis 4

Four arguments have been classified as those emphasising the personal benefits of getting vaccinated: protection against COVID-19 infection/hospitalisation/death (present in 27 videos), getting vaccinated can help us get back to "normal" (8), protecting family and/or children (7) and protection against severe disease (6). Arguments categorised as other appeared in 6 videos.

37 videos featured at least one argument referring to personal benefits from vaccination (approx. 53% of the sample). In addition, the "protection against COVID-19 infection/hospitalisation/death" argument was used in the videos more often than any other argument. On the other hand, the total number of other arguments used in the videos was higher than the total number of all personal benefit arguments. The former was featured 79 times, the latter – 54 times.

Fourth hypothesis is partially supported. The arguments referring to individual benefits of getting vaccinated appeared in more than half of the sample, and one of them – "protection against COVID-19 infection/hospitalisation/death" – was used more often than other arguments. The total number of other arguments used in the videos, however, exceeded the total number of these that highlight personal benefits.

⁵¹ As of 3 December 2022.

Hypothesis 5

Medical experts appeared in 34 videos (approx. 49% of the sample). In 17 films, specialists addressed common concerns about possible COVID-19 vaccine side effects.

Hypothesis 5 is confirmed. At least one-third of the campaign videos feature medical experts.

Most viewed films (> 1 mln views)

12 of the 70 videos were viewed more than 1 million times⁵². 10 of the 12 most watched films were 30 seconds in length (approx. 83% of the most viewed films). 7 videos featured face close-ups (approx. 58%), 7 – smiling (approx. 58%), 6 – hugging (50%), 4 – the flag of the United States (approx. 33%), 3 – cheek kissing (25%), 1 – vaccine recipients (approx. 8%). 3 films showed medical experts (25%).

The most frequently used argument in the group was “protection against COVID-19 infection/hospitalisation/death” (4 videos; approx. 33%). Arguments highlighting the personal benefits of vaccinating were used in 6 films (50%). Negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic were mentioned or presented in 8 videos (approx. 67%).

Least viewed films (< 2000 views)

14 of the 70 videos were viewed less than 2000 times⁵³. 11 of the 14 least watched films were 15 seconds or less in length (approx. 79% of the least viewed films). 3 videos featured face close-ups (approx. 21%), 7 – smiling (50%), 4 – hugging (approx. 29%), 5 – vaccine recipients (approx. 36%). The flag of the United States and cheek kissing did not appear in any of the films. 4 videos featured medical experts (approx. 29%).

The most frequently used arguments in the group were: protection against COVID-19 infection/hospitalisation/death (4 videos; approx. 29%) and vaccinations are easily accessible (4; approx. 29%). Arguments emphasising the personal benefits of vaccinating were used in 6 films (approx. 43%). Negative consequences of COVID-19 pandemic were mentioned or presented in 2 videos (approx. 14%).

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The research material was selected on 25 November 2022 and viewing figures were checked on 3 December 2022. This means that the sample will not include any videos that may have been removed from

⁵² As of 3 December 2022.

⁵³ As of 3 December 2022.

the channel before 25 December or after 3 December⁵⁴. The sample also excludes videos made in languages other than English and films longer than 5 minutes.

The author was unable to analyse the comments of YouTube users to the posted videos as the comments feature has been turned off. Analysis of viewer reactions could prove valuable in verifying the proposed hypotheses and examining the effectiveness of the campaign videos.

The analysis focuses on the videos posted on the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' channel on YouTube. Therefore, it does not include videos that may have appeared on other social media platforms of HHS and the comments or likes that would accompany them. The paper also does not consider the reactions of TV viewers and TV viewing figures of the videos (if they were broadcast on television).

Conclusions

The results of content analysis enabled to identify the persuasion strategies used in the “We Can Do This” campaign videos to encourage COVID-19 vaccinations in the United States and verify the proposed hypotheses. In the light of the recent research on COVID-19 vaccine messaging, the campaign designers used various effective techniques to promote COVID-19 vaccines.

First of all, the “We Can Do This” campaign videos are not overloaded with messages emphasising the vaccine safety. The video makers used a variety of different arguments to highlight the safety of COVID-19 vaccines and created films that address common concerns about possible COVID-19 vaccine side effects. Information on the safety of COVID-19 vaccines, however, appears in less than half of the sample.

Secondly, the campaign does not rely excessively on fear appeals. Of the 70 videos, only 4 are COVID-19 survivor stories or nurses' stories which constitutes less than 10% of the sample. The negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic were mentioned or presented less often than arguments emphasising the benefits of vaccinating and/or the positive aspects of COVID-19 vaccine/vaccination procedure. The former appears in 35 videos, the latter in 55 films.

Thirdly, the campaign videos use messages emphasising the personal benefits of vaccinating. Arguments highlighting individual benefits from vaccination were featured in more than 50% of the films. Moreover, one of them – “protection against COVID-19 infection/hospitalisation/death” – is the top 1 most used argument in the sample.

⁵⁴ The author is unaware if any videos were removed before 25 November 2022 or after 3 December 2022.

Fourthly, and lastly, the campaign engages medical experts to speak on the vaccines. Health specialists appeared in nearly half of the campaign videos. Additionally, in 17 videos, they addressed public concerns about possible COVID-19 vaccine side effects.

While the campaign videos used a variety of effective strategies in promoting COVID-19 vaccines, the results of content analysis raise one concern. If fear-based appeals have proven unsuccessful in convincing the unvaccinated,⁵⁵ the question arises whether the number of films mentioning or presenting the negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic is not too high. This concern, however, is of course purely theoretical and, without evidence, may prove unfounded.

The results of this study also show differences and similarities between the most and least watched videos. Nearly 84% of the most viewed films were 30 seconds long while most of the least viewed films lasted 15 seconds or less. Face close-ups, facial expression like smiling and gestures such as hugging and cheek kissing appeared more often in the videos that have been viewed more than 1 mln times. Vaccine recipients, on the other hand, were shown more often in the films with the lowest viewership.

In the group of most-watched films, negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic were mentioned or presented more often than arguments emphasising individual benefits of getting vaccinated. In the group of least-watched films, the situation was the opposite.

In both groups, there was a similar percentage of films featuring medical experts. The most frequently used argument in the group of most-watched videos was “protection against COVID-19 infection/hospitalisation/death”. The same is true for the group of least-watched videos, with the difference that the “vaccinations are easily accessible” argument received the same result.

Conducting content analysis allowed to distinguish strategies used in the “We Can Do This” campaign videos to promote COVID-19 vaccinations in the United States in 2021 and examine whether these techniques were effective considering the research on COVID-19 vaccine messaging. However, the results of this study do not provide data on the actual effectiveness of the videos on the U.S. population, including people from different communities.

Being aware of the limitations of the work, the author hopes this article will inspire further research on strategies used in educational campaigns in other countries to encourage COVID-19 vaccination, the effectiveness of these messages and their reception by different communities.

⁵⁵ Civis Analytics, *Made to Save*, op. cit. (accessed 15.11.2022); Civis Analytics, op. cit. (accessed 15.11.2022).

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Biogram

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