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Building public trust: a response to COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy predicament

ABSTRACT

With the rollout of vaccines against COVID-19, an optimistic and a negative attitude among people have arisen. Surprisingly, surveys among people reveal that there is a significant rate of distrust against the vaccines. In a recent short report published in this journal, vaccine hesitancy was found out among medical students. Hence, wide array of research has been springing, recommending various approaches in assisting authorities deal with vaccine hesitancy such as proper and effective strategic communication as a solution. This study suggests however that a more 'localized' public education and role-modelling from public officials and health authorities can help a lot in building public trust. The study aims to contribute to the further development of public health mechanisms in the rolling-out and distribution of vaccines against COVID-19.

Keywords COVID-19, public health, public trust, vaccine hesitancy

The quest to suppress and end the Novel Corona Virus has brought about an unprecedented speedy surfacing of vaccines that are born out of the prodigious research of experts and authorities. Yet, despite of the alleged scientific warrant and immediate solution to the global health crisis, several people still show some doubts against the vaccine. In a recent short report published in this journal, COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy was found out among nearly a quarter of medical student participants in the USA.¹ Furthermore, medical staff² are still hesitant to partake in the mandatory vaccination program of governments.³

Earlier studies in this journal pictured the distrust and reasons for hesitancy of several people to participate in the vaccination against COVID-19 such as language barriers,⁴ and negative emotions such as fear and anxiety.⁵ Hence, in the said studies, a well-defined and effective strategic communication is recommended to sell the idea of vaccination. However, a bigger challenge that public health authorities will be facing is the post-modern condition of information blast and the objectivity of the held truth. The World Health Organization (WHO) has in fact warned the public that the world is in battle over another kind of epidemic called 'infodemics' that progressively spreads fake news, wrong information and false scientific claims.⁶ Studies also shows that the emerging biopolitics, as introduced by Michel Foucault, where a government takes the power of determinacy over the death or survival of a population, is coming to reality, increasing

more the level of fear, anxiety and hesitancy⁷ especially to minorities.⁸

With the growing distrust of people on COVID-19 vaccines, mandatory vaccinations shall be a major predicament to authorities who wishes to implement it. Recently, a number of authorities⁹ and companies¹⁰ have expressed their interest in requiring vaccinations to their constituents to ensure a safe and healthy environment. Furthermore, airline operators have also started considering the mandatory utilization of health passport or vaccine passport for travelers with international destination as a matter of proof for vaccination.¹¹ However, governments or companies, even before imposing mandatory vaccination, may well have to first consider building the trust of the public. WHO identified six determinants of trust: competence, objectivity, fairness, consistency, sincerity and faith that must be translated to public education.¹² Studies have also shown that through proper, effective and a more localized, relevant and specific public education, people are to develop more confidence in the vaccination and government.¹³ Strategic communication that should be coupled with an expression of the total pros and cons of vaccination must be reduced and tailored to a specific audience to ensure relevance.¹⁴ Unfortunately, a number of scientists have criticized researchers¹⁵ for the lack of information transparency among vaccines that are being developed. It is not surprising therefore to discover that the number of minorities still embrace an attitude of doubt toward vaccination. Moreover, public

health practitioners and government officials, despite of their expertise and authority, should exert effort in promoting an image of public trust and sincerity. According to a study, 'Public health practitioners can no longer just assume that patients or the public will simply 'trust' them because of their position in society or their extensive training.'¹⁶ In the recent first ever vaccinations against COVID-19 conducted by the UK and USA, the world has witnessed the limited presence of medical experts and head of states as recipients of the inoculation. Authorities who voluntarily subject themselves to vaccination increase the level of trust among people since sincerity for the vaccine safety is visualized.

With the advent of vaccine against COVID-19, there is a high hope of ending the pandemic that has distorted the lives of people. WHO has encouraged all people to promote the vaccination process. Promotion and encouragement, however, are founded on public trust. Nonetheless, this study suggests two important essential actions from public health authorities for public trust: localizing information through education and modelling system that pre-figures sincerity. The said actions can somehow augment authorities' strategic communication efforts in building public trust that is essential in promoting vaccination against COVID-19.

Authors' contribution

All authors contributed to all aspects of the manuscript.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest in this paper.

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