RSV
ISSN 2674-8584

Received: 13/07/2026 - **Accepted:** 20/08/2026
Vol: 08.08 - August
DOI: 10.66104/bjmzf860
Pages: 1-13

Misinformation, Health Literacy, and Vaccine Hesitancy: Implications for Public Policies

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RSV
ISSN 2674-8584

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Abstract

Vaccination represents one of the most effective public health interventions for preventing infectious diseases and reducing morbidity and mortality worldwide. However, vaccine hesitancy has emerged as a major challenge for immunization programs, influenced by misinformation, distrust in institutions, communication failures, and unequal levels of health literacy. The rapid expansion of digital communication platforms has transformed the circulation of health information, creating new opportunities for education while also facilitating the dissemination of inaccurate or misleading content. This scenario has significant implications for public policies, particularly regarding the maintenance of vaccination coverage and the protection of population health. This academic essay analyzes the relationship between misinformation, health literacy, and vaccine hesitancy, emphasizing their implications for public health policies and immunization strategies. The discussion explores the social and informational factors associated with vaccine confidence, the role of health literacy in enabling informed decision-making, and the challenges faced by governments and healthcare systems in responding to misinformation. The manuscript highlights that addressing vaccine hesitancy requires integrated approaches combining evidence-based communication, community engagement, trust-building, and policies capable of strengthening health systems' ability to respond to contemporary information challenges.

Keywords: misinformation; health literacy; vaccine hesitancy; immunization; public policies; health communication.

1. Introduction

Vaccination has transformed global health by preventing infectious diseases, reducing mortality, and contributing to increased life expectancy. Immunization programs represent one of the most successful collective interventions in the history of public health, protecting not only vaccinated individuals but also communities through reduced transmission and the maintenance of population immunity. Despite these achievements, sustaining high vaccination coverage has become increasingly challenging in several contexts due to social, political, informational, and behavioral factors.

Vaccine hesitancy has emerged as a complex phenomenon that influences decisions regarding acceptance, delay, or refusal of vaccines. Unlike simple opposition to immunization, vaccine hesitancy involves a continuum of attitudes shaped by confidence, perceived risks, accessibility, personal experiences, cultural beliefs, and interactions with healthcare systems. The growing circulation of misinformation has intensified these challenges by influencing perceptions of vaccine safety, effectiveness, and institutional credibility.

The expansion of digital technologies has fundamentally changed the way health information is produced, shared, and interpreted. Social media platforms allow rapid dissemination of scientific information and public health messages but also facilitate the

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spread of inaccurate claims, conspiracy narratives, and misleading interpretations of evidence. In this environment, health literacy becomes increasingly important because individuals need the capacity to evaluate information sources, understand scientific recommendations, and make informed health decisions.

Considering the increasing influence of misinformation and the persistence of vaccine hesitancy despite scientific advances, this essay seeks to answer the following research question: How can strengthening health literacy and developing evidence-based public policies contribute to reducing misinformation and vaccine hesitancy while improving the effectiveness of immunization programs?

2. Methodology

This manuscript is structured as an academic essay based on critical reflection and theoretical analysis of scientific literature addressing misinformation, health literacy, vaccine hesitancy, immunization programs, health communication, and public policy responses. The objective is to examine contemporary challenges associated with vaccine confidence and discuss strategies capable of strengthening collective responses to information-related barriers in public health.

The discussion is organized into three thematic sections. The first section analyzes vaccine hesitancy and misinformation as contemporary challenges affecting immunization programs. The second section examines the importance of health literacy as a mechanism for improving understanding, critical evaluation of information, and informed decision-making. The third section discusses the implications of misinformation for public policies and explores strategies for strengthening communication, trust, and institutional responses.

To maintain argumentative flow and facilitate reading continuity, scientific references are not inserted throughout the body of the manuscript. All theoretical perspectives, empirical considerations, and conceptual discussions presented in this essay are supported by peer-reviewed scientific literature and institutional publications, which are listed in the reference section according to the American Psychological Association (APA, 7th edition) formatting style.

3. Development

3.1 Vaccine Hesitancy, Misinformation and the Contemporary Public Health Scenario

Vaccine hesitancy has become one of the most significant challenges facing immunization programs worldwide. Although vaccines remain among the safest and most effective public health interventions, acceptance cannot be assumed automatically. Decisions regarding vaccination are influenced by multiple factors, including individual beliefs, social influences, political contexts, trust in institutions, previous experiences with

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RSV
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healthcare systems, and perceptions regarding risks and benefits. Therefore, vaccine hesitancy should be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon rather than as a simple consequence of lack of knowledge or refusal of scientific evidence.

The contemporary landscape of vaccine hesitancy differs substantially from historical periods when limited vaccine access represented the primary barrier to immunization. In many settings, vaccines are now widely available, yet doubts regarding their safety, necessity, and effectiveness continue to influence individual decisions. This transformation demonstrates that increasing vaccine availability alone is insufficient; public confidence, communication strategies, and institutional credibility are equally important components of successful immunization policies.

Misinformation has become a central factor affecting vaccine confidence in the digital era. False or misleading information about vaccines can spread rapidly through online platforms, reaching large audiences before accurate scientific explanations become available. The speed and emotional appeal of misinformation often allow inaccurate narratives to gain visibility, creating challenges for public health institutions attempting to communicate complex scientific evidence in accessible ways.

The characteristics of digital communication environments contribute to the persistence of misinformation. Online platforms frequently reward content that generates emotional reactions, controversy, or rapid engagement, regardless of its scientific accuracy. As a result, sensational claims about vaccine risks may receive disproportionate attention compared with evidence-based information, influencing perceptions among individuals who may have limited opportunities to critically evaluate competing messages.

Misinformation regarding vaccines often relies on narratives that exploit uncertainty, fear, and distrust. Claims questioning vaccine safety, alleging hidden intentions, or exaggerating adverse effects may appear convincing because they provide simple explanations for complex issues. These narratives can be particularly influential when individuals perceive public institutions, governments, or healthcare systems as distant, unreliable, or insufficiently transparent.

Trust represents a fundamental component of vaccine acceptance. Individuals are more likely to follow immunization recommendations when they trust healthcare professionals, scientific institutions, and public health authorities. Conversely, declining trust can weaken the effectiveness of vaccination campaigns, even when scientific evidence supporting immunization remains strong. Building and maintaining trust is therefore a central objective of contemporary public health strategies.

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified debates surrounding vaccines and highlighted the relationship between information environments and health behaviors. The rapid development of vaccines, the circulation of conflicting messages, political disputes, and intense media attention created conditions in which uncertainty and misinformation could influence public perceptions. This experience demonstrated that effective pandemic

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RSV
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responses require not only scientific innovation but also robust communication systems capable of addressing public concerns.

Social media has created both opportunities and challenges for vaccination efforts. Digital platforms can support health education, facilitate communication between healthcare professionals and communities, and expand access to reliable information. However, they can also amplify inaccurate content, create information overload, and reinforce beliefs within groups sharing similar views. Public health strategies must therefore engage with digital environments rather than treating them only as sources of risk.

Vaccine hesitancy is also influenced by historical and social contexts. Communities with experiences of discrimination, inadequate healthcare access, or institutional neglect may develop skepticism toward health authorities and public interventions. In these situations, hesitancy may reflect broader concerns regarding trust, representation, and social justice rather than simply a lack of understanding about vaccines.

Healthcare professionals occupy a particularly important position in addressing vaccine hesitancy because they are often considered among the most trusted sources of health information. The quality of communication between professionals and patients can significantly influence vaccination decisions. Approaches based on listening, empathy, respectful dialogue, and recognition of individual concerns are generally more effective than strategies focused exclusively on correcting misinformation.

The relationship between scientific communication and public understanding represents another important challenge. Scientific evidence is often complex, evolving, and expressed through probabilities rather than absolute certainty. Communicating uncertainty effectively requires strategies that explain scientific processes while maintaining credibility. Poor communication regarding changing recommendations or emerging evidence may unintentionally contribute to confusion and reinforce distrust.

Educational inequalities influence individuals' ability to interpret health information and evaluate competing claims. Populations with limited access to quality education or health information resources may experience greater difficulties distinguishing reliable sources from misinformation. This relationship highlights the importance of strengthening health literacy as part of broader strategies to improve vaccine confidence and reduce informational vulnerabilities.

The consequences of vaccine hesitancy extend beyond individual choices because vaccination programs depend on collective participation. Reduced vaccine coverage can lead to outbreaks of preventable diseases, increased healthcare costs, and greater risks for vulnerable populations who cannot be adequately protected through individual vaccination alone. Therefore, vaccine acceptance represents both a personal health decision and a collective public health concern.

Addressing vaccine hesitancy requires recognizing that information alone does not determine health behaviors. Individuals interpret information through personal experiences, social relationships, cultural values, and perceptions of institutions. Effective interventions

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must therefore combine accurate communication with trust-building strategies, accessible healthcare services, and meaningful engagement with communities.

In this context, misinformation and vaccine hesitancy represent interconnected challenges requiring comprehensive public health responses. Combating inaccurate information, strengthening confidence in immunization programs, and improving communication between institutions and populations are essential steps for maintaining vaccination coverage. Sustainable solutions depend on understanding the social dimensions of vaccine decision-making and developing policies capable of responding to the complexity of contemporary information environments.

3.2 Health Literacy as a Strategy to Address Misinformation and Strengthen Vaccine Confidence

Health literacy has become an essential component of contemporary public health because it influences individuals' ability to access, understand, evaluate, and use health information. In an environment characterized by the rapid circulation of scientific information and misinformation, health literacy provides individuals with the skills necessary to make informed decisions regarding prevention, treatment, and health behaviors. Regarding vaccination, stronger health literacy contributes to greater understanding of vaccine benefits, improved interpretation of risks, and increased capacity to critically assess unreliable information.

Traditional approaches to health education often assumed that providing more information would automatically lead to healthier decisions. However, vaccine hesitancy demonstrates that information availability alone does not guarantee acceptance of scientific recommendations. Individuals may have access to large amounts of information while still experiencing difficulties evaluating credibility, understanding scientific evidence, or distinguishing reliable sources from misleading content. Health literacy therefore involves not only knowledge acquisition but also the development of analytical and decision-making abilities.

The complexity of modern health information environments increases the importance of critical evaluation skills. Scientific discussions about vaccines frequently involve concepts such as probability, effectiveness, adverse events, population-level benefits, and risk comparisons. Without adequate health literacy, individuals may interpret these concepts incorrectly or give disproportionate importance to isolated events presented through emotionally compelling narratives. Strengthening health literacy helps individuals contextualize information and understand scientific evidence more accurately.

Digital health literacy has become particularly relevant due to the expansion of online communication platforms. Individuals increasingly use the internet and social networks to obtain health information, compare recommendations, and discuss personal experiences. While digital environments provide opportunities for education and engagement, they also require users to evaluate sources, identify misinformation, and recognize unreliable claims.

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Developing digital health literacy is therefore essential for navigating contemporary information ecosystems.

Healthcare professionals play a central role in promoting health literacy and supporting informed vaccination decisions. Clinical encounters provide opportunities to clarify doubts, explain scientific concepts, address fears, and adapt communication according to individual needs. Rather than simply transmitting information, effective communication requires dialogue, active listening, and recognition of the social and emotional factors influencing vaccine decisions.

Communication strategies based on empathy are particularly important when addressing vaccine hesitancy. Individuals who express doubts or concerns may not necessarily reject vaccination but may require additional information, reassurance, and respectful discussion. Approaches that immediately dismiss concerns or label individuals negatively may increase resistance and reduce trust. Health literacy interventions should therefore promote dialogue and mutual understanding rather than confrontation.

Primary Health Care represents a strategic setting for developing health literacy initiatives because it maintains continuous relationships with individuals and communities. Regular interactions with healthcare teams create opportunities for ongoing education, prevention counseling, and clarification of health information. By incorporating vaccine discussions into routine care, Primary Health Care can strengthen confidence and reduce uncertainty before misinformation influences individual decisions.

Community engagement is another important dimension of health literacy promotion. Public health messages are more effective when they consider local realities, cultural contexts, and community experiences. Working collaboratively with community organizations, educators, and local leaders can increase the relevance and credibility of vaccination information. Communities that participate in the development of health strategies are more likely to perceive these initiatives as legitimate and responsive to their needs.

Educational institutions also contribute significantly to strengthening health literacy. Schools and universities provide opportunities to develop scientific reasoning, critical thinking, and understanding of health-related topics from early stages of life. Incorporating health literacy into educational systems may help future generations evaluate information more effectively and participate more actively in health decisions.

The relationship between health literacy and vaccine confidence is also influenced by social inequalities. Individuals facing socioeconomic disadvantages may experience barriers to accessing reliable information, healthcare services, and educational resources. These inequalities can increase vulnerability to misinformation and reduce opportunities for informed decision-making. Therefore, improving health literacy requires policies that address broader social determinants rather than focusing exclusively on individual capacities.

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RSV
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Accessible communication is fundamental for effective health literacy strategies. Public health messages should consider language complexity, cultural diversity, educational levels, and different communication preferences. Technical information presented without adaptation may fail to reach important segments of the population. Clear, transparent, and inclusive communication increases the likelihood that individuals will understand and trust vaccination recommendations.

The role of healthcare professionals as trusted communicators requires institutional support and continuous training. Professionals need preparation not only regarding vaccine science but also regarding communication techniques, management of uncertainty, and strategies for responding to misinformation. Developing these skills strengthens the ability of health systems to engage communities and maintain confidence during periods of controversy or crisis.

Health literacy also contributes to greater individual autonomy. When individuals are capable of understanding health information and evaluating evidence, they can participate more actively in decisions affecting their own health and the health of their communities. In vaccination contexts, this autonomy supports decisions based on accurate information rather than fear, misinformation, or social pressure.

Public health systems should therefore consider health literacy as a long-term investment rather than a temporary communication strategy. Improving population capacity to interpret health information strengthens resilience against misinformation and supports multiple areas beyond vaccination, including disease prevention, chronic disease management, and appropriate healthcare utilization. The benefits of stronger health literacy extend across the entire healthcare system.

Ultimately, strengthening health literacy represents a fundamental strategy for addressing misinformation and improving vaccine confidence. It requires coordinated efforts involving healthcare professionals, educational institutions, public authorities, and communities. By empowering individuals to critically evaluate information and participate meaningfully in health decisions, health literacy contributes to more effective immunization programs and more resilient public health systems.

3.3 Public Policies and the Challenges of Combating Misinformation in Immunization Programs

Public policies play a decisive role in maintaining effective immunization programs and responding to the growing challenges associated with misinformation and vaccine hesitancy. Vaccination strategies depend not only on the availability of vaccines but also on institutional capacity, communication systems, healthcare accessibility, surveillance mechanisms, and public confidence. In this context, governments and health authorities must develop comprehensive approaches that address both biomedical requirements and the social dynamics influencing vaccine acceptance.

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RSV
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Immunization policies have traditionally focused on ensuring vaccine supply, organizing vaccination campaigns, and expanding population coverage. While these components remain essential, contemporary challenges require broader strategies capable of addressing informational environments, trust relationships, and social determinants of vaccine decisions. The effectiveness of vaccination programs increasingly depends on the ability of public institutions to communicate effectively and respond rapidly to emerging concerns.

One of the main challenges for public policies is the speed at which misinformation spreads compared with traditional institutional communication processes. Health authorities often rely on formal communication pathways that may require extensive verification and approval procedures, while inaccurate information can circulate instantly through digital networks. This asymmetry requires governments to develop more agile communication systems capable of monitoring, identifying, and responding to misinformation in a timely manner.

Risk communication has become a central element of modern immunization policies. Effective communication should not focus only on promoting vaccine uptake but also on explaining uncertainties, acknowledging legitimate concerns, and providing transparent information about benefits and potential risks. Populations tend to trust institutions more when communication recognizes complexity and avoids oversimplified messages that may later undermine credibility.

The relationship between governments and communities represents another fundamental dimension of vaccination policies. Public confidence is strengthened when health authorities engage communities, listen to concerns, and incorporate local perspectives into program development. Policies designed without considering social contexts may encounter resistance, even when based on strong scientific evidence. Community participation therefore contributes to more legitimate and sustainable immunization strategies.

Primary Health Care services are essential partners in implementing public policies related to vaccination. While national programs establish guidelines and objectives, primary care teams translate these policies into everyday healthcare practices. Their direct relationships with individuals and communities position them as important actors for building trust, identifying barriers, addressing doubts, and promoting vaccine acceptance through continuous engagement.

Digital platforms present both challenges and opportunities for public health policies. Governments must address misinformation online while also using digital environments to expand access to reliable health information. Social media campaigns, online educational materials, and digital communication channels can increase the reach of vaccination messages when developed according to principles of clarity, transparency, and audience engagement.

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RSV
ISSN 2674-8584

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The regulation of digital information environments represents a complex policy challenge. Balancing freedom of expression with the need to reduce harmful misinformation requires careful consideration of ethical, legal, and social dimensions. Public policies should prioritize transparency, accountability, and collaboration with technology platforms while avoiding approaches that may reduce public trust or unintentionally reinforce misinformation narratives.

Surveillance systems can contribute to understanding patterns of vaccine hesitancy and misinformation. Monitoring vaccination coverage, identifying geographic areas with declining uptake, and analyzing public concerns allow health authorities to develop targeted interventions. Data-driven approaches help move beyond generalized communication strategies and support actions adapted to specific population needs.

The development of communication capacities within health institutions is another important policy priority. Public health organizations require trained professionals capable of translating scientific evidence into accessible messages, managing public concerns, and responding effectively during periods of uncertainty. Communication should be recognized as a technical competence within health systems rather than as an auxiliary activity.

Educational policies also contribute to long-term responses against misinformation. Strengthening scientific education and critical thinking skills from early stages of life can improve individuals' ability to interpret health information and evaluate evidence. Schools and educational institutions can serve as important environments for developing the foundations of health literacy and preparing citizens to navigate complex information landscapes.

Vaccine policies must also address inequalities that influence access and confidence. Populations experiencing poverty, geographic isolation, discrimination, or limited healthcare access may face greater difficulties obtaining reliable information and vaccination services. Improving equity requires not only increasing vaccine availability but also adapting strategies to reach populations facing structural barriers.

The experience of recent public health crises demonstrated that trust cannot be built exclusively during emergencies. Institutional credibility develops over time through consistent communication, transparency, responsiveness, and reliable healthcare delivery. Public policies aimed at improving vaccine confidence must therefore consider trust-building as a continuous process rather than a short-term intervention implemented only during vaccination campaigns.

Collaboration between different sectors is increasingly necessary for effective responses to misinformation. Health authorities, educational institutions, scientific organizations, community groups, communication professionals, and digital platforms all have roles in creating healthier information environments. Coordinated action improves the capacity of societies to respond collectively to misinformation while promoting accurate and accessible health knowledge.

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RSV
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Evaluation of public policies is essential to determine whether strategies aimed at reducing vaccine hesitancy are achieving their objectives. Monitoring vaccination rates, public perceptions, communication effectiveness, and community engagement allows programs to adapt and improve over time. Policies that are not evaluated risk maintaining approaches that may be ineffective or insufficiently responsive to changing social conditions.

In this context, combating misinformation and strengthening immunization programs require a comprehensive public policy approach that integrates communication, education, healthcare organization, and community participation. Vaccine confidence is not created through isolated campaigns but through sustained relationships between institutions and populations. Building resilient immunization systems depends on policies capable of combining scientific evidence with social understanding, transparency, and commitment to public trust.

4. Conclusion

Misinformation and vaccine hesitancy represent complex challenges that extend beyond individual decisions and reflect broader social, informational, and institutional dynamics. Although vaccination remains one of the most effective public health interventions, maintaining high immunization coverage requires more than ensuring vaccine availability. The contemporary information environment, characterized by rapid digital communication and the circulation of conflicting narratives, demands innovative approaches capable of strengthening trust, improving health literacy, and supporting informed decision-making. Addressing vaccine hesitancy requires recognizing the importance of communication, social context, and the relationship between individuals and health institutions.

Public policies have a fundamental role in developing sustainable responses to misinformation and strengthening immunization programs. Strategies that integrate Primary Health Care, evidence-based communication, community engagement, scientific education, and equitable access to healthcare services are essential for improving vaccine confidence. Building resilient vaccination systems depends on continuous investment in trust, transparency, and the capacity of health systems to engage with populations in respectful and meaningful ways. In this perspective, health literacy becomes a central component of public health protection, enabling individuals and communities to navigate complex information environments and participate actively in decisions that influence collective health.

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ISSN 2674-8584

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ISSN 2674-8584

Received: 13/07/2026 - **Accepted:** 20/08/2026
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