INDIANA UNIVERSITY
OBSERVATORY ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Tracking public opinion about unsupported narratives

Observatory on
Social Media (OSoMe)
Indiana University-Bloomington

Tracking public opinion about unsupported narratives

Wave 8, Jul 20 - Aug 3, 2021

Indiana University's Observatory on Social Media (OSoMe) continues to track widely circulated but unsupported narratives in public discourse, with the goal to assess the public's awareness of them, the extent to which they are believed, and whether a person's political leanings, media use, and personal traits are related to vulnerability to these narratives.

This is a report on our eighth wave of data, collected from July 20 to Aug 3, 2021. The first six waves were pre-election surveys.

The summary report from waves 1-6 can be found at:
https://osome.iu.edu/research/survey/files/FinalSummary_UnsupportedNarratives_OSoMe.pdf

The report for Wave 7 is at:
https://osome.iu.edu/research/survey/files/Wave7_UnsupportedNarratives_OSoMe.pdf

Narratives

In each wave, we show respondents screenshots from social media that represent trending but factually unsupported narratives, and ask them if they have encountered the narratives, or similar ones, on social media or the internet. In addition to asking whether respondents have seen each narrative, we also ask to what extent they believed the narratives.

In Wave 8, we continue to track two narratives:

The CDC is hiding negative effects of COVID vaccines. [1]

COVID-19 vaccines cause infertility among women. [2]

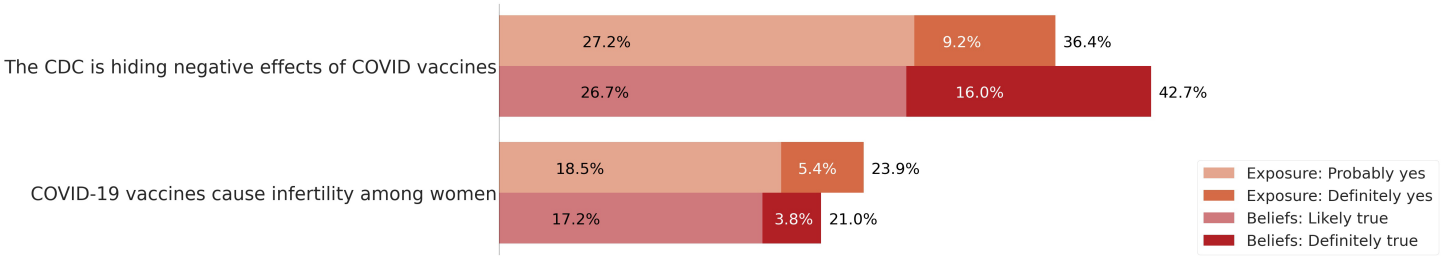
Results

As in previous waves of our surveys, we found that significant groups of respondents believe that the narratives are true. **Figure 1** shows that 42.7% thought that it was either definitely or likely true that the CDC is hiding negative effects from COVID vaccines. About 21% think that vaccines may cause infertility.

[1] https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2021/may/20/facebook-posts/cdc-not-manipulating-its-covid-19-breakthrough-dat/

[2] https://www.factcheck.org/2021/02/scicheck-no-evidence-vaccines-impact-fertility/

Figure 1 *Exposure to and belief in vaccine misinformation*



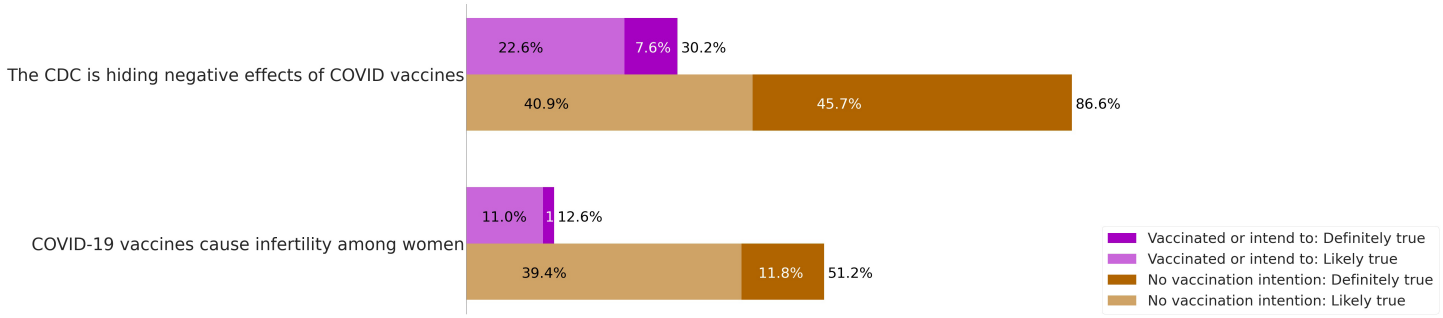
Narratives and vaccination intention

In our survey, 9.54% of participants said they had tested positive for COVID at some point.

About 66.5% said that they had received or already made an appointment to receive a COVID vaccination. Of individuals who had not been vaccinated, 66.1% indicated that they did not intend to. Overall, 78% of the sample had either already been vaccinated, made an appointment, or intended to. These vaccine intention numbers were quite similar compared to our survey in late June.

Of those who have no ultimate vaccination intention, 86.6% believed that the CDC is hiding negative effects of the COVID, and 51.2% believed that the vaccines are causing infertility among women. In comparison, among those who either have already been vaccinated or intend to get vaccinated, 30.2% believed that the CDC is hiding negative effects and 12.6% believed the infertility story (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 *Belief in vaccine misinformation: vaccinated or intend to vs. no intention*



Who are the vaccine hesitant?

As noted above, about 22% of our sample said that they do not intend to be vaccinated. Comparing this group to those who had been vaccinated or intended to be, we found that that the group was more likely to be male, more likely to be white, more likely to be Republican, and younger (see Table 1).

[3] On Aug 1, 2021,, national statistics showed that 57.9% of the US population had received at least one dose.

Concerning media use, this group was less likely to watch CNN or MSNBC, but more likely to watch Fox News. They were also less likely to show diversity of use among those three cable news sources.

The vaccine-hesitant were less likely to use Twitter, and more likely to use Youtube. Facebook use was about the same between the two groups.

Table 1 *Characteristics of vaccine-hesitant versus others*

	Vaccinated or intend to be	Do not intend to be vaccinated	Overall sample
% male	46	49.6	46.8
% white	57.2	81.1	62.5
% Republican	33.1	73.2	41.9
average age	48.59	44.41	47.7
% less than Bachelor's degree	39.5	56.5	43.3
% use Facebook	85	88.3	85.7
% use Twitter	39.5	24.1	36.1
% use YouTube	74	83.9	76.1
% use Instagram	55	51.7	54.2
% watch Fox News	42.09	59.1	45.3
% watch MSNBC	18.6	7.5	16.4
% watch CNN	41.3	21.5	37.5

What are they saying?

We asked all respondents to identify what they consider to be the "most important problem" facing the country. Most respondents answer with a few short words. To get a sense of how the vaccine-hesitants are thinking compared to the overall sample, we look at the word frequencies of response to this question in each group.

Table 2 *Top responses (word frequency, ranked) to question "What is the most important " problem facing our country?*

Vaccinated or intend to be	Do not intend to be vaccinated
covid	economy
economy	government
racism	security
covid-19	immigration
pandemic	covid
government	president
immigration	biden
economic	border
security	control
biden	

Overall, vaccine-hesitants tend to mention COVID less, unsurprisingly, and there is more focus on issues like immigration and the border.

Vaccine resistance is tied up with demographic, political and media use patterns that indicate that the issue is as much ideological as it is concerned with vaccine effects. Issues of political resentment are not easily solved with science communication, for this hard-core group.

Methodology

This is the eighth of a series of reports tracking diffusion of misinformation. Data in this Wave were collected from an online panel of American adults, recruited by Qualtrics. Data were collected from July 20 - Aug 2, 2021. The sample size was 574 (margin of error ≈ 4%). Fifty two percent of participants were female. The average age was 47.6 (SD = 17.61), with a range of 19 to 92. The sample was 62.5% white, 11.6% Black, and 3.0% Latina/Latino.

OSoMe

The Observatory on Social Media is a joint project of the Network Science Institute (IUNI), the Center for Complex Networks and Systems Research (CNetS) at the Luddy School of Informatics, Computing, and Engineering, and the Media School at Indiana University.