

Amplifying Youth Voices: Recommendations for Enhancing Vaccine Uptake and Acceptability in Policy and Practice

Short Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the critical importance of vaccine availability and uptake, yet rising vaccine hesitancy presents a significant challenge, particularly among youth. Despite proven efficacy, hesitancy persists due to negative healthcare experiences, distrust, and misinformation. Engaging youth is crucial in addressing this challenge. Drawing from qualitative data in Nigeria, South Africa, and Zambia, this paper explores youth recommendations to enhance COVID-19 vaccine acceptance, aiming to inform global strategies to combat hesitancy and improve public health outcomes. Using the Accelerate Framework for Youth Acceptability, this study utilized convenience sampling to engage 165 individuals aged 15-24 across South Africa, Zambia, and Nigeria. We conducted 12 face-to-face focus groups and 38 in-depth remote interviews. We conducted thematic analysis collaboratively, using both deductive and inductive approaches. Findings revealed that personalized communication, in-person expert engagement, and localized dissemination through influencers, community leaders, and trusted networks are crucial components in fostering vaccine acceptance.

Extended Abstract

The global response to the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the critical importance of vaccine availability and uptake. Despite the proven efficacy of vaccines in controlling the virus's spread, achieving high vaccination rates remains a challenge due to rising vaccine hesitancy. This hesitancy, characterized by delayed acceptance or outright refusal of available vaccines, poses a significant global health threat recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO). Negative healthcare experiences, distrust in government, and the proliferation of misinformation on social media have contributed to this phenomenon.

However, the effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines has not translated into a decline in global vaccine hesitancy; rather, the rapid development and distribution of these vaccines have exacerbated pre-existing distrust and suspicion. Particularly concerning is the prevalence of COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy among adolescents, with alarmingly high rates observed in sub-Saharan Africa. Given that young people constitute a substantial portion of the global population and play a crucial role in shaping societal attitudes and behaviours, their buy-in and engagement are essential in addressing public health crises.

This paper draws from qualitative data collected from diverse groups of young adults in Nigeria, South Africa, and Zambia to explore their recommendations for policy and practice to increase COVID-19 vaccine acceptability among young people. By incorporating youth voices into policy recommendations, this study aims to inform comprehensive strategies to improve vaccine acceptability and uptake in this age group, ultimately contributing to global efforts to combat vaccine hesitancy and enhance public health outcomes.

Data and Methods

Sampling

This exploratory qualitative study engaged in 12 face-to-face focus groups and 38 remote in-depth interviews involving 165 individuals aged 15-24 across South Africa, Zambia, and Nigeria. Participants were recruited using convenience sampling through networks and connections with organizations serving young adults. Collaborating with eight community-based organizations (CBOs), three in South Africa, one in Zambia, and four in Nigeria, participants were enlisted directly or through CBO representatives. Ensuring gender balance researchers contacted potential participants until reaching the desired number of willing participants.

Data Collection

The data collection process was conducted in collaboration with community-based partners in South Africa, Nigeria, and Zambia and comprised two components: Covid-19 vaccine acceptability (the focus of this study) and evaluating the acceptability of diverse

interventions. Semi-structured topic guides for focus groups and interview guides for individual interviews were utilized, incorporating both open-ended questions and specific inquiries based on the Accelerate Framework for Youth Acceptability. Participants rated Covid-19 vaccine acceptability on a scale of 1 to 5 and provided qualitative justifications, while specific questions addressed each of the framework's nine components. Responses guided the data analysis, focusing on youth recommendations for both overall vaccine acceptability and specific acceptability components.

Findings

Our analysis revealed two main themes in participants' recommendations regarding COVID-19 vaccine acceptability: "Healthcare-related recommendations" and "Information and Training recommendations." Within each theme, several subthemes were identified.

The healthcare-related theme includes the perspectives and recommendations of young participants regarding the healthcare system's role in vaccine acceptability. This theme is elucidated through the following subthemes: "Examining Non-Injectable Vaccine Approaches," "Prioritizing Medical History Check-up", "Friendly Health Systems", and "Vaccination Strategy".

The Information and communication theme highlights the influence of educational initiatives and the accessibility of accurate, reliable information on the acceptance of vaccinations among participants. Young people emphasized the importance of raising vaccine awareness in schools, community centers, and public forums, to empower individuals in making informed decisions about their health and well-being. Sub-themes identified were: "using public figures as vaccine role models", "media utilization for vaccine awareness", "school-based education and teacher training and "engagement through community campaigns".

Conclusion

The study aimed to provide a direct voice to young people from Nigeria, South Africa, and Zambia, to understand what they would recommend policymakers and practitioners do to increase vaccine acceptability. We believe that our findings can provide valuable insights that may be applied in two ways: first, to empower the design of tailored interventions that resonate with young people, paving the way for increased vaccine uptake and acceptability; second, to highlight areas where young people may need further information and interaction to understand why some of their recommendations may not be feasible in the immediate or longer term.

The findings emphasize the pressing need for policy interventions that address the fear of injections, provide educational programs in schools and visible leadership influence, and strategically use multiple types of media for accurate and trusted vaccine

information dissemination. The significance of personalized communication, in-person expert engagement, and localized dissemination through influencers, community leaders, and trusted networks emerges as crucial components in fostering vaccine acceptance. Embracing these policy implications is vital for creating inclusive, patient-friendly, and culturally sensitive vaccination approaches that resonate with the diverse perspectives of the youth population.