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## Research Article

# Exploring the public's perception of COVID-19 vaccinations in Pakistan: A Qualitative Approach

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## Abstract

The novel coronavirus is extremely contagious and has spread quickly in a matter of months throughout the entire world. In many countries, vaccination is a complicated phenomenon. Because of both its successes and shortcomings, it has consistently been in the news. Similar to how COVID-19 has been the subject of rumors and conspiracy theories throughout the world owing to unease, worry, and terror over a phenomenon that is always changing, COVID-19. These stories ought to be viewed as "social phenomena" that show how different socio-cultural, economic, and geo-political aspects interact. Public perceptions and attitudes have their origins in the nation's varied socioeconomic, economic, and political elements, which are crucial in the development of unique imaginaries and behavior. We all belong to a global community, and COVID-19 has shown that as a result, providing appropriate healthcare is both a national and international responsibility. This study employed a qualitative method to acquire information on people's attitudes and perspectives on the current COVID-19 pandemic vaccines in Pakistan, in-depth qualitative interviews (n=30) were performed. The 30 files are transcribed before being loaded into the NVivo program, which is then used to locate, code, group, and establish a conceptual framework based on emergent themes using thematic analysis. It was found that the majority of the respondents have positive perceptions regarding the COVID-19 vaccinations as far as quality is concerned. The themes that emerged from these interviews were awareness, experience, and negative word of mouth. Finally, results show the significance of the study for different aspects of use in various walks of life in our global society.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Coronavirus, Vaccine, Pandemic, Perception, Rumors.

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## Introduction

Vaccination faces several challenges across the world that are context-specific (Nichter, 1995; Savelsberg et al., 2000; Ali, 2020 a,c). Among socio-cultural, economic, and political factors, natural disasters and health emergencies such as the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic considerably affect immunization endeavors (Ali, 2020c; World Health Organization, 2020). This pandemic has posed serious challenges to and interruptions in routine immunization activities around the globe, such as the need for physical distancing and the fact that COVID-19 has overwhelmed healthcare systems in many countries to the point where many vaccination programs have been temporarily halted (Ali, 2020d). There is evidence that when vaccination is halted as resources are shifted elsewhere, vaccine-preventable diseases (VPDs) cause severe outbreaks, as was observed during the Ebola outbreak in West Africa (Masresha et al., 2020). Drawing on their risk-benefit analysis of routine childhood immunization in 54 African countries, Abbas et al. (2020) argue that the benefits of continuing routine childhood immunization programs outweigh the risk of COVID-19 contagion related to vaccination clinic visits. To continue vaccination, they suggest the use of necessary protective measures—physical distancing, personal protective equipment (PPE), and effective hygiene practices—to prevent COVID-19 transmission during vaccination administration encounters.

## Pakistan Context

During the pandemic's early days, it was rightly anticipated that COVID-19 containment measures would substantially affect routine vaccination programs. There was no empirical evidence for this, simply plausible assumptions. Yet by now, these assumptions have been verified (Ali, 2020b). It was also predicted that due to distinct socio-cultural, economic, and political factors, the impact of the pandemic on vaccination programs would be distinct in low-income countries like Pakistan (Ali, 2020b). There is also convincing evidence that one out of every two children missed their routine vaccinations in Pakistan during COVID-19 (Chandir et al., 2020).

In Pakistan, both during the epidemic and in scheduled intervals, vaccination initiatives in low-resource environments have several challenges, particularly when factors like (geo)politics are at play. For instance, sociocultural, economic, and (geo)political factors all have an impact on local perceptions of COVID-19 and vaccine administration in Pakistan. Vaccination operations

in Pakistan have long been hampered by rumors and conspiracy theories (Abimbola et al., 2013, Ali, 2020). People's perspectives in Pakistan are shaped by a variety of elements, including social, socioeconomic, and political influences. These elements play a role in shaping people's opinions about the virus and its vaccination (Ali & Ali, 2020). COVID-19 containment techniques were expected to have a significant impact on routine immunization efforts during the early stages of the pandemic. This was based on plausible assumptions rather than empirical data. However, these assumptions have since been confirmed (Ali, 2020b). Due to socio-cultural, cultural, and political differences, it was also predicted. The public is concerned about safety and effectiveness because of the vaccinations' hurried approval process and worry about side effects (Ali, 2020b). Several incorrect perceptions about the vaccine, such as female infertility, hormonal alterations, and human microchip implantation, were communicated through such channels, widening the gap between reality and false conceptions about the vaccine (Jin, Raza, Yousaf, Zaman, & Siang, 2021). The public's conceptions about the COVID-19 virus and vaccination, and the danger connected to both have probably altered over the past few months, according to the present pandemic. The spread of immunization has been hampered by a lack of resources and unreliable and often limited



healthcare options enabling appropriate COVID-19 testing and treatment in several distant populations (Hahn, Fried, Cochran, & Eichelberger, 2022).

Literature related to the coronavirus concerns has focused on the role of attitudes, religiosity, subjective norms, and behavioral control, more importantly, consumer perceptions related to COVID-19 vaccination are not much explored. A research gap opens up concerning the issues of COVID-19 vaccination-related perceptions, especially regarding the question of which population groups are particularly affected. This study will explore the perceptions of consumers (university students and opinion leaders) about COVID-19 vaccination in Pakistan. The study's findings may have an immediate impact on the general public's perceptions and attitudes toward COVID-19 vaccination.

## Methodology

The interview survey method was used to collect responses from respondents in this qualitative study. It was conducted in the district of Lahore including suburban areas/big cities in Punjab Pakistan. The sample size of 30 persons recruited from university students and opinion leaders through convenience and snowball sampling techniques was used to reach the respondents from different fields i.e. medical, para-medical, education, and the general public. These individuals were chosen based on relevant sociodemographic and substantive factors and lived in diverse geographic locations and have different employment conditions, family and living arrangements, and ties to COVID-19 (22 people not affected by COVID-19 nor those around them, 8 with people around them diagnosed with the illness). Probing questions refer to the use of key questions to draw out more comprehensive narratives (Kvale, 1996). A wide spectrum of diversity is essential for a seamless discussion with the respondents during interviews (Bloor et al., 2001). Interviews were performed until saturation was attained. In this study, saturation was defined as the point at which material gathered during interviews revealed no more themes. The interviewers are chosen from among the 37 persons who agreed; there are just 07 refusals due to the discomfort that discussing COVID-19 vaccination may cause the person. Individuals contacted are informed of the study's aim and features, as well as confidentiality protections. To develop the protocol, reviewed the relevant literature on COVID-19 vaccinations and instruments for evaluating the perceptions related to the vaccinations in the traumatic situation of the pandemic. A semi-structured interview guide with four main and probing questions was developed.

The in-depth qualitative interviews (n=30) were done for this study to get insights into people's mindsets and perceptions about the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic vaccinations in Pakistan and to build a conceptual framework based on emerging themes via thematic analysis. According to Yin (2014), thematic analysis aimed at minimizing data and required several phases such as transcribing thoughts, ideas, and remarks from audio-recorded recordings, indexing and sorting comments into appropriate categories, or otherwise recombining the evidence to address the study's primary purpose. Thematic analysis is important in qualitative research because it has a substantial impact on the findings of the research (Flick, 2015). The interview recordings are processed using document files in which the coding system is recorded. The statements are given transcripts to ensure the validity of this study in terms of emerging themes. This systematic categorization of collected data aided in the discovery and interpretation of dimensions of emerging themes. NVivo is used to analyze qualitative data for codes or themes. Coding is always necessary to ensure that the observation and resulting conclusion are valid and reliable (Krippendorff, 2018). This procedure is carried out once all transcribed interviews have



been uploaded to the NVivo for analysis. During the coding process, unique lines of text denote topics related to the study and generate new ways to organize and prepare data for thematic analysis.

## Results and Analysis

Following the thematic analysis, five themes emerged: perception, awareness, experience, contextual factors, and negative word of mouth about COVID-19 vaccination in Pakistan.

### Contextual Framework

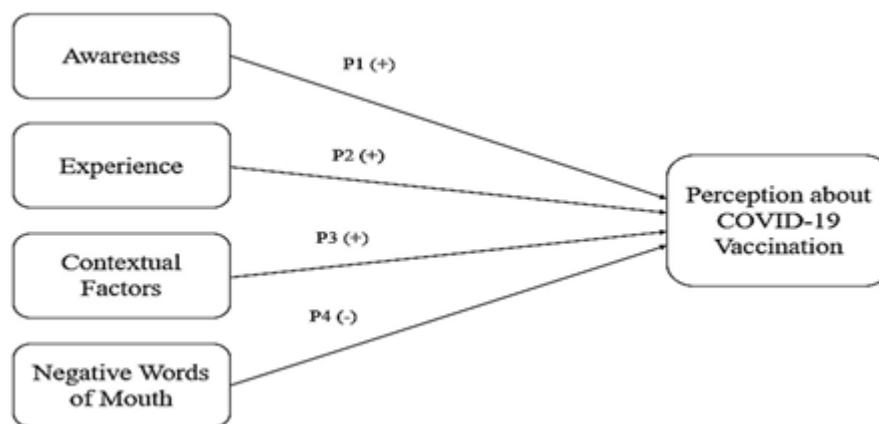
In light of the findings of the aforementioned empirical study, the following conceptual framework is proposed to acquire Pakistanis' current attitudes toward COVID-19 vaccination. The contextual framework mentioned above endorses the following prepositions:

P1: The awareness about immunization program positively affects the perception of consumers towards COVID-19 vaccination.

P2: The experience about immunization program positively affects the perception of consumers towards COVID-19 vaccination.

P3: The contextual factors about immunization program positively affects the perception of consumers towards COVID-19 vaccination.

P4: The negative words of mouth about immunization program negatively affects the perception of consumers towards COVID-19 vaccination.



## Discussion, Implications and Conclusions

The findings revealed five emerging themes influencing people's perceptions of COVID-19 vaccination in Pakistan: perception, awareness, experience, contextual factors, and negative word of mouth. In this study, the majority of university students and opinion leaders are adequately informed about the pandemic and its potential implications, including the vaccine effort. The most influential elements were sex, age, field, education, awareness, social rumors, and family members' inoculation experiences. Significant discrepancies were found among students and opinion leaders from various academic backgrounds, ages, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Depression and anxiety symptoms were more prevalent among those



who received the COVID-19 vaccines. These findings imply that focused interventions should be carried out on students in field subjects, students of low age groups, students with poor or very high economic status, students living in distant or rural locations, and family members who have not received COVID-19 immunizations. It also infers that there should be more awareness and explanations regarding the new COVID-19 vaccination. It is preferable to provide formal training, education, and publicity regarding the effectiveness and potential adverse effects of COVID-19 vaccinations to healthcare practitioners.

Vaccination remains a critical issue in low-income nations like Pakistan even though one of the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 emphasizes the need for vaccine development and distribution, as well as the accessibility of affordable essential medicines and vaccines, particularly for developing countries (WHO, 2018). Furthermore, we should expect continuous outbreaks of vaccine preventable diseases (VPDs) including measles, influenza, rubella, yellow fever, and polio, in addition to refusals and resistance to the COVID-19 vaccination in Pakistan and, most likely, other nations, as a result of this much pressure exerted against vaccination campaigns. Not only must the substantial effects of COVID-19 on routine vaccination be reversed, but, the government should correspondingly address the critical challenges affecting the country's immunization program. A competent, ethical government that attends to the concerns of the rural poor is necessary to provide adequate healthcare. Once more, political and social institutions are shielded from corruption, social unrest, and political instability by governments that are stable, honest, transparent, and effective. Similar to how diseases impair the physical body, corruption, and structural injustices weaken the governmental body and prevent everyone from having effective governance.

The current study makes several noteworthy contributions. First, we add to a young but quickly expanding body of knowledge about variables that influence attitudes and beliefs of vaccination. According to evolutionary theory, harsh and unpredictable conditions cause conflicts between individuals' goals and societal norms (Hofmann et al., 2012). The study's findings have several applications that might help immunization techniques be improved. Interventions that result in such an improvement in self-regulation ability may be used to raise vaccination intentions among people since self-control enhances people's intentions to get a COVID-19 vaccine. Therefore, a more creative, persuasive-oriented communication strategy is needed to motivate people to increase vaccine uptake. An effective vaccination promotion campaign can include messages about travel desire to reduce vaccine anxiety and stimulate a positive attitude toward COVID-19 vaccine intentions. By providing trustworthy information on the COVID-19 vaccine by the competent authority the necessary measures should be made to make the immunization coverage more efficacious. Furthermore, social media, government, and non-government groups should collaborate with healthcare providers to increase vaccination knowledge and acceptability.

## Recommendations

Both in terms of the continuous global epidemic and the pace and amount of true and false information, we are seeing an unparalleled event. Pakistan's immunization uptake may increase as a result of the openness and honesty of reputable local leaders during the vaccine procedure. To promote targeted COVID-19 outreach, it will be crucial to continue keeping track of vaccination rates across demographic groups and geographic areas, as well as to conduct regular surveys of residents' expanding knowledge, attitudes, and habits. An effective and locally approved immunization campaign for COVID-19 and more vaccine-preventable diseases and illnesses in Pakistan relies on government power to deliver vaccinations and draws on Indigenous knowledge.



To avoid future issues caused by other microbes, all efforts should be taken to perform routine immunization programs during these Covidian seasons. However, we suggest that such efforts will be useless unless Pakistanis, particularly the rural poor, are adequately informed on the necessity, components, and effectiveness of vaccinations as well as the very real risks associated with vaccine refusal. People need to have the conviction that their government is on their side and not complicit in Western or American schemes. To increase vaccine uptake and effectively manage future concerns, Pakistan and other countries like it need “proactive” efforts rather than “reactive” coping mechanisms. We all reside in a global society, as demonstrated by COVID-19, making access to quality healthcare both a national and international responsibility.

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