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## IMC Professor Honored for Study of Vaccine Discourse on Social Media

**Amanda Bradshaw examined advertising and discussions in early months of COVID-19 pandemic**

SEPTEMBER 15, 2022 BY LAREECA RUCKER



OXFORD, Miss. – A **University of Mississippi** assistant professor of **integrated marketing communications** has earned an honorable mention in the Nafziger-White-Salwen Dissertation Award juried competition.

Amanda Bradshaw's three-part dissertation examined vaccine-related social media advertising and organic vaccine discourse on social media in the early months of COVID-19, from March to May 2020.

"Notably, the World Health Organization identified vaccine hesitancy as one of the top 10 threats to our societal health in early 2019, well before the spread of the novel coronavirus," Bradshaw said. "Thus, this work has implications beyond COVID-19 and is not limited to the current health crisis, but rather contributes to the formulation of effective social media messaging strategies to combat vaccine hesitancy holistically – including COVID-19."



Amanda Bradshaw, an assistant professor of integrated marketing communications, earned an honorable mention in the Nafziger-White-Salwen Dissertation Award competition for her studies of vaccine-related social media advertising and discussion during the early days of COVID-19. Submitted photo

Bradshaw said she became interested in this topic while managing strategic communication for a medical group that specialized in pediatrics.

"Anecdotally, we were seeing more expectant and new mothers coming in who were unprepared to make childhood vaccine choices and were choosing to delay or decline one or more standard childhood vaccines," she said. "The policy of the practice, at the time, was to dismiss these patients rather than engage in dialogue or shared decision making."

When Bradshaw began working on her doctorate at the University of Florida, she sought to explore better ways to communicate about vaccines with expectant and new mothers – both in clinical settings and via social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, which mothers frequently access seeking health information.

Her first study utilized the theoretical foundation of framing theory to explore the framing of vaccine-related advertisements in the Facebook Ad Library. Bradshaw believes it is only the second study to use the Facebook Ad Library tool, invented in 2018, to examine vaccine-related advertisements, and the only study since Facebook implemented policies to eliminate vaccine misinformation on its platform.

"I compared my findings with previous baseline findings to discern whether vaccine advertisements were framed differently on Facebook following a series of steps taken by the largest social media platform to actively lessen health misinformation in its sponsored posts," she said.

Bradshaw's second study utilized counterpublic sphere theory to explore the discourse related to #DoctorsSpeakUp, a hashtag invented by pro-vaccine doctors to collectively promote vaccines on Twitter, but which was instead hijacked by anti-vaccine advocates. Analysis revealed that the majority of tweets subverted the original message and instead advocated against vaccines, she said.

Her third study explored what source credibility cues mothers rely on when evaluating the trustworthiness of vaccine messages on social media, and whether a mixture of positive and negative comments, as appear organically on Facebook, influence mothers' willingness to share these messages.

"In its entirety, this work illuminates the strategies that pro-vaccine campaigns on social media should employ to resonate the most with their target audience and to achieve greater reach, awareness, and

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OXFORD, Miss. – Peer recognition is a rewarding experience for anyone, but University of Mississippi researcher Amir Mehrara Molan was elated when an article he co-authored recently received the Most Cited Paper Award at the 102nd Transportation Research Board meeting in the nation's capital. The International Journal of Transportation Science and Technology presented the civil engineering

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OXFORD, Miss. – Stephanie Jennings Teague, of Chicago, sees her commitment of \$100,000 to the Patterson School of Accountancy's new building at the University of Mississippi as a means of saying "thank you." "It is a way to show a small token of my appreciation to Ole Miss, the faculty and staff, and the accounting

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U.S. inflation roller coaster prompts fresh look at long-ignored money supply By Michael S. Derby NEW YORK – The amount of money sloshing around the U.S. economy shrank last year for the first time on record, a development that some economists believe bolsters the case for U.S. inflation pressures continuing to

ultimately increase vaccine uptake, being mindful of potential backlash such as what was experienced in the #DoctorsSpeakUp hashtag hijacking,” she said.

Presented by the **Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication**, the Nafziger-White-Salwen award is the gold standard for excellence in dissertations in the field of communication, said Gregory P. Perreault, an associate professor of digital journalism at Appalachian State University.

“Our entire research committee, which includes scholars with impressive qualifications in every aspect of mass communication, reads and evaluates all of the finalists for this award,” he said. “The competitiveness of this year is impressive, not only because of the sheer number of submissions – one of our highest – but because of the quality of the submissions, which were absolutely remarkable given the challenges that doctoral candidates faced in accomplishing their research in the midst of the pandemic.

“Dr. Bradshaw’s dissertation is emblematic of the analytical quality that we ask for in the award, but could never have expected under such difficult conditions. Her work is testament to the sort of scholarship that deserves recognition and attention within our field.”

Deb Wenger, associate dean of the UM **School of Journalism and New Media**, said the award helps confirm what school officials knew about Bradshaw when they hired her.

“Dr. Bradshaw is already having an impact on the field of communication and in our classrooms,” Wenger said. “We are lucky to have someone with her skills as a scholar and as a teacher as part of the integrated marketing communications program.”

Bradshaw’s key takeaways from the study include:

### **Vaccine hesitancy is not new**

“Vaccine hesitancy has existed long before COVID-19 and was, in fact, labeled a top-10 global threat in early 2019, prior to the pandemic,” Bradshaw said. “Thus, it is not a new phenomenon.”

Vaccine decision-making is complex and multifaceted, and there is no one-size-fits-all PSA or communications campaign that will encourage everyone to vaccinate, she said. Vaccine choices are nuanced and influenced by many factors, including the perception of safety and efficacy, antigen, individual factors related to a person’s health and history, and social influence.

“But pro-vaccine campaigns can be used to move the needle and encourage some fence-seekers who are still undecided about vaccines to vaccinate,” Bradshaw said.

They can also encourage pro-vaxxers to share vaccine-positive messages that may influence others in their peer network to make similar choices by helping to normalize vaccination, she said.

### **Effective pro-vaccine messages are two-sided**

Since COVID-19, the topic of vaccination has become more politicized, and pro-vaxxers are more hesitant to engage in the topic, especially on social platforms, due to worries over controversy or the perception that deciding to vaccinate is a personal choice, Bradshaw said.

“Thus, effective pro-vaccine messages should seek to be two-sided and encourage a dialogue rather than being shaming or moralistic,” she said.

The participants in Bradshaw’s third study, who all identified as pro-vaccine, disliked messages that had a moralistic undertone or shaming message, such as “Everyone who is smart vaccinates without question,” she said.

“In fact, they related more to the idea that good parents do ask questions – and seek credible sources to answer those questions,” she said.

Bradshaw said she learned that messages centered on personal health benefits tend to be more effective in promoting childhood vaccination than those that encourage individuals to vaccinate for the sake of others in the community.

“These messages should be grounded in research and point users to credible links/sources to do additional research, particularly for those who tend to process information more centrally and who want to access more than peripheral cues about vaccination,” she said.

### **Stakeholder buy-in and credibility are critical**

Before undertaking a vaccine campaign on social media, Bradshaw advises that the effort should be carefully thought-out and strategized, garnering buy-in from major stakeholder groups.

“In the case of the #DoctorsSpeakUp campaign, the voices of the medical community were quickly drowned out by anti-vaccine advocates, and only a small minority of tweets studied – less than 17% – originated from pro-vaccine doctors, despite the campaign’s original intent to bring the medical

abate. The Federal Reserve’s

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community together to promote vaccines,” she said.

Bradshaw said the campaign could have been more successful if organizations such as the American Medical Association, American Academy of Pediatrics and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had endorsed it, actively participated in it and encouraged their members to do the same.

“Interestingly, at the time of data collection in Study 1, most of the aforementioned organizations, state health departments, universities and other major medical entities were silent and not publishing paid vaccine content on Facebook, which was a bit surprising due to the timing and context of the research (March-May 2020),” she said.

Study 1 also revealed that 26% – of a sample size of 41 – of advertisers representing an array of vaccine stances were individual political candidates or their political campaign representatives, Bradshaw said. This may have contributed to the continued politicization of vaccines, including the COVID-19 vaccine, which was not available at the time.

“In short, despite the potential backlash, there is an important role for medical professionals and organizations to play in communicating about vaccines on social media,” she said.

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