

Background

Most pregnant people search the internet for pregnancy-related information at least once a month. For these adults, online communities can fill critical health and social needs outside of clinical settings: offering crowdsourced information for medical decision-making, facilitating connections over shared experiences, and providing interpersonal support.

Study Objective

Explore the role of a large online community in shaping the vaccination experiences of pregnant people who are open to recommended vaccines (influenza, Tdap, COVID-19, RSV) but have additional needs or concerns.

Research Method

Online conversations from a pregnancy-focused "subreddit" with over 900,000 weekly visitors were extracted using the social science research tool Communalytic.

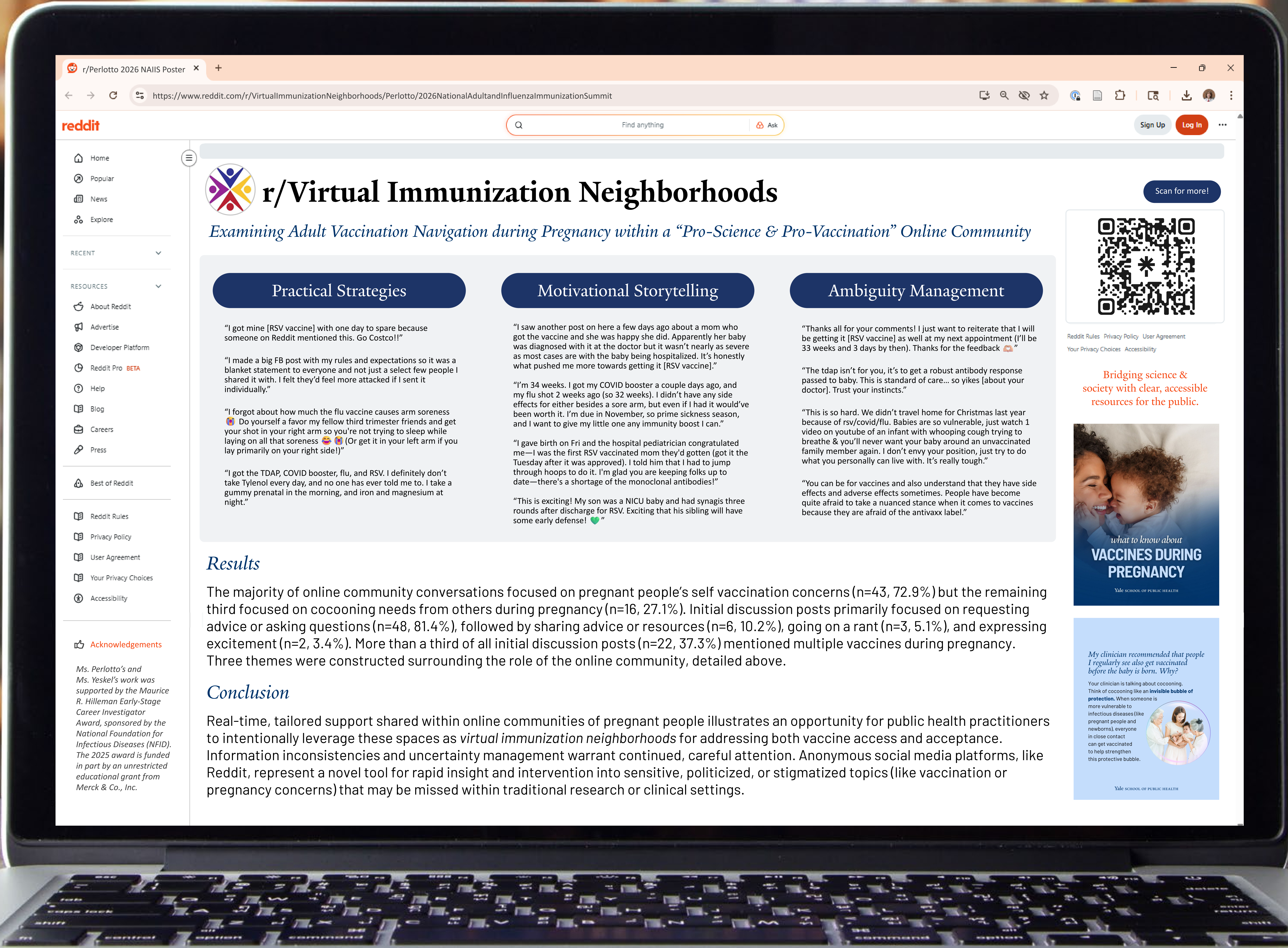
Conversations (59 discussion posts, 2500 comments/replies) meeting inclusion criteria for vaccine-related keywords and the 2023-2024 U.S. respiratory virus season date range were analyzed using a six-step process of thematic analysis.

The social media platform Reddit was selected for its topic-focused community format, user anonymity, and open accessibility.

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r/Virtual Immunization Neighborhoods

Examining Adult Vaccination Navigation during Pregnancy within a "Pro-Science & Pro-Vaccination" Online Community

Practical Strategies

"I got mine [RSV vaccine] with one day to spare because someone on Reddit mentioned this. Go Costco!!"

"I made a big FB post with my rules and expectations so it was a blanket statement to everyone and not just a select few people I shared it with. I felt they'd feel more attacked if I sent it individually."

"I forgot about how much the flu vaccine causes arm soreness 🤦🏻 Do yourself a favor my fellow third trimester friends and get your shot in your right arm so you're not trying to sleep while laying on all that soreness 🤦🏻🤦🏻 (Or get it in your left arm if you lay primarily on your right side!)"

"I got the TDAP, COVID booster, flu, and RSV. I definitely don't take Tylenol every day, and no one has ever told me to. I take a gummy prenatal in the morning, and iron and magnesium at night."

Motivational Storytelling

"I saw another post on here a few days ago about a mom who got the vaccine and she was happy she did. Apparently her baby was diagnosed with it at the doctor but it wasn't nearly as severe as most cases are with the baby being hospitalized. It's honestly what pushed me more towards getting it [RSV vaccine]."

"I'm 34 weeks. I got my COVID booster a couple days ago, and my flu shot 2 weeks ago (so 32 weeks). I didn't have any side effects for either besides a sore arm, but even if I had it would've been worth it. I'm due in November, so prime sickness season, and I want to give my little one any immunity boost I can."

"I gave birth on Fri and the hospital pediatrician congratulated me—I was the first RSV vaccinated mom they'd gotten (got it the Tuesday after it was approved). I told him that I had to jump through hoops to do it. I'm glad you are keeping folks up to date—there's a shortage of the monoclonal antibodies!"

"This is exciting! My son was a NICU baby and had synagis three rounds after discharge for RSV. Exciting that his sibling will have some early defense! ❤️"

Ambiguity Management

"Thanks all for your comments! I just want to reiterate that I will be getting it [RSV vaccine] as well at my next appointment (I'll be 33 weeks and 3 days by then). Thanks for the feedback 🍌"

"The tdap isn't for you, it's to get a robust antibody response passed to baby. This is standard of care... so yikes [about your doctor]. Trust your instincts."

"This is so hard. We didn't travel home for Christmas last year because of rsv/covid/flu. Babies are so vulnerable, just watch 1 video on youtube of an infant with whooping cough trying to breathe & you'll never want your baby around an unvaccinated family member again. I don't envy your position, just try to do what you personally can live with. It's really tough."

"You can be for vaccines and also understand that they have side effects and adverse effects sometimes. People have become quite afraid to take a nuanced stance when it comes to vaccines because they are afraid of the antivaxx label."

Results

The majority of online community conversations focused on pregnant people's self vaccination concerns (n=43, 72.9%) but the remaining third focused on cocooning needs from others during pregnancy (n=16, 27.1%). Initial discussion posts primarily focused on requesting advice or asking questions (n=48, 81.4%), followed by sharing advice or resources (n=6, 10.2%), going on a rant (n=3, 5.1%), and expressing excitement (n=2, 3.4%). More than a third of all initial discussion posts (n=22, 37.3%) mentioned multiple vaccines during pregnancy. Three themes were constructed surrounding the role of the online community, detailed above.

Conclusion

Real-time, tailored support shared within online communities of pregnant people illustrates an opportunity for public health practitioners to intentionally leverage these spaces as *virtual immunization neighborhoods* for addressing both vaccine access and acceptance. Information inconsistencies and uncertainty management warrant continued, careful attention. Anonymous social media platforms, like Reddit, represent a novel tool for rapid insight and intervention into sensitive, politicized, or stigmatized topics (like vaccination or pregnancy concerns) that may be missed within traditional research or clinical settings.



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