

Girls' Positions and Authoritative Information Sources in Finnish Online Discourses on the HPV Vaccine

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Purpose of this paper

This study examines discourses circulating around the human papilloma virus (HPV) vaccine in different online contexts by focusing on Finnish girls' positions in vaccination decision-making and information sources that inform it. The HPV vaccine aims at preventing HPV-related cancers, especially cervical carcinoma (Maver & Poljak, 2018). Whereas most vaccines included in national vaccination programmes are provided to children before school age, the HPV vaccine is usually offered to pre-adolescent or adolescent girls. Thus, girls are not only the objects of HPV vaccination decision-making, but can also themselves be actively involved. This has raised questions on who makes—or should make—the decision to vaccinate: is it a parental decision, that of the child receiving the vaccine, or a shared decision? As information is a fundamental resource in decision-making (Lloyd et al., 2013), another important question concerns the information vaccination decisions are based on: what kind of information and knowledge sources become important in this decision-making? The present study focuses on the ways Finnish girls position themselves and are positioned by others as HPV vaccination decision-makers in public media, on one hand, and in informal online discussions on the other. Moreover, it explores the kinds of information sources that are presented as authoritative in these settings. The overall aim of the study is to increase understanding of the ways people use and value diverse sources of information and knowledge in making a decision on a vaccine.

Methodology

The material was collected in January–March 2020 from the websites of the Finnish public service media company Yle and a Northern Finnish newspaper Kaleva, and from two Finnish discussion

forums: Demi that is directed to girls and young women and Suomi24, which is a popular anonymous online forum. As a whole, the material comprises of 130 news articles and 325 discussion threads from years 2005–2020. Based on their discussions' content and the nature of the online forums, the discussions were labeled as “girls' discussions” (Demi forum) and “adults' discussions” (Suomi24 forum, comments to news items). A preliminary analysis of the whole data informed the selection of a smaller sample of 30 news articles, 30 girls' discussion threads, and 30 adults' discussion threads for a more careful analysis. This selection aimed at representativeness in perspectives and temporality and salience in terms of the topic of the study. Positioning analysis (Harré & van Langenhoven, 1999) was used to guide the analysis in examining the positions actors produce to themselves and others. Moreover, the concept of cognitive authority (Wilson, 1983), including the notions of biomedical, individual, and experiential cognitive authority (McKezie, 2003) informed the analysis. The study serves as a *discourses survey* (Scollon & Scollon, 2004) for a broader nexus analytic study examining the linkages between discourse and action (Scollon & Scollon, 2004; see also Multas & Hirvonen, 2019).

Findings

News articles portray girls in contradictory positions: as objects of health authorities' and parents' decision-making but also as independent decision-makers. The news articles uniformly present health authorities, researchers, and health professionals as authoritative information sources in terms of the HPV vaccine. This way, they highlight *biomedical cognitive authority*. In adults' online discussions, girls receive passive positions, and tension emerges between parents' and health authorities' decision-making positions. The discussions are polarized into extremes representing pro- and anti-vaccination voices and connect to broader value systems. They foreground *individual cognitive authority*, mainly based on the participants' own reasoning and information seeking. In girls' online discussions, girls are positioned and positioned themselves as independent decision-makers, guided by trusted adults and institutions and peers holding *experiential cognitive authority*, that is, authority that is based on experiential knowledge gained from the HPV vaccine. The discussion focuses on the immediate effects of the vaccination such as pain and fear of needles.

Research implications

The study does not attempt to generalize its findings but may help in understanding how health related cognitive authorities emerge in different contexts and in connection to positions in decision-making. This can offer valuable points of reflection for health information behaviour research: active decision-making positions are likely to be connected to also taking responsibility on information seeking, and vice versa (see Genuis 2012). Surprisingly, in the present study, girls

were very rarely positioned as participants in *shared* decision-making. This opens up avenues for future research.

Practical implications

Better understanding on the discourses circulating around the HPV vaccine and vaccination decision-making can aid in planning future vaccination campaigns and communication.

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