

Dear Editor,

Vanderslott highlights several shortcomings of COVID-19 vaccination that need to be addressed in preparation for future pandemics. I would like to highlight an additional area of concern, which my colleagues and I describe in a paper published in Vaccine X in March 2025 (footnote 1). By analysing a large dataset of tweets that mention one or more vaccines, we discovered that (a) some people evaluate the COVID-19 vaccines negatively as compared with MMR or other vaccines, based on a perception of low effectiveness against infection, and (b) this sometimes leads people to question the status of the COVID-19 vaccines as vaccines:

"Yes because the covid vaccine is just like the MMR vaccine. NOT. MMR vaccine provides 99.8% protection from catching measles, mumps or rubella. Covid vaccine does NOT stop you from catching covid. Vaccinate away but it's not going to stop covid."

"It's not even a real vaccine. You can catch Covid and also spread it if you are vaccinated. You don't catch polio or MMR after you are vaccinated."

Moreover, the term 'shot' is sometimes used in contrast with 'vaccine', to suggest an inferior and less worthwhile intervention:

"Stop calling it a vaccine. It's a shot."

During the pandemic, the status of the flu vaccine as a vaccine was sometimes undermined in similar terms:

"Can you tell me more about this 'vaccine' for the flu that allows tens of thousands of deaths? That's not a vaccine, it's a flu shot. Much different than say a polio vaccine or MMR vaccine. I would argue that we do NOT have a flu vaccine."

We found almost no evidence of similar statements concerning any vaccines prior to 2020.

It is not a surprise that this new form of vaccine-specific scepticism ('a-vaccine-is-not-a-vaccine') arose during the pandemic. For the first time in history, people could prove via easily available lateral flow tests that they had caught a disease after being vaccinated against it. This clashed with most people's understanding of what a vaccine is for, i.e. the prevention of illness. Definitions of vaccination provided, for example, by the NHS and the WHO indeed currently focus on preventing infection.

In preparation for future pandemics, it will be crucial to communicate that some diseases, like COVID-19 and flu, are vaccine-modifiable, in contrast with vaccine-preventable diseases like measles and polio. Care also needs to be taken with informal terms such as 'shot' and 'jab', in case they are perceived as referring to something different from 'vaccine'.

Footnote

1. Semino, E., Coltman-Patel, T., Dance, W., Demjén, Z., Gleave, R. and Mackey, A. (2025) 'It's a shot, not a vaccine like MMR': A new type of vaccine-specific scepticism on Twitter during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Vaccine X*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvacx.2025.100620>