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Vaccine as a *cheat sheet*: The power of metaphor to build and undermine pandemic-related arguments on Facebook

Despite two years of SARS-CoV-2 pandemic-related negative effects and more than one and a half year of free access to COVID-19 vaccines, many people across the globe are still reluctant to get vaccinated. Undoubtedly, COVID-19 vaccines and the vaccination campaigns across the globe are an important topic of the pandemic discourse. As with the pandemic in general, militaristic metaphors were frequently used to explain what vaccines are and how they work to equip our immune system with the necessary antibodies to fight the COVID-19 disease. This study focuses instead on a non-war metaphor used in a FB post by a Romanian health communicator, Vlad Mixich, to talk about the technology underlying the mRNA vaccine. An advocate of COVID-19 vaccination, Mixich posted lots of vaccine-related information on his FB page; one of the messages published on December 29, 2020 (two days after the start of the vaccination campaign in Romania) contained a metaphorical explanation to how the mRNA vaccine functions, namely the vaccine as a *cheat sheet*. This metaphor is supposed to capture and convey the functioning of mRNA as a virus-mimicking device that trains the immune system to recognize the disease-causing part of the real virus. This paper discusses the aptness of the vaccine as *cheat sheet* metaphor against the discursive, social and cultural particularities of the context in which it was used. Drawing on previous studies on metaphor aptness (Chiappe, Kennedy & Chiappe, 2003; Thibodeau & Durgin, 2011) and discourse affordances of constructed metaphorical sources (Wee, 2005), the study analyzes the appropriateness of this metaphor to describe the mRNA vaccine and its argumentative potential in conversation. The findings reveal that the metaphorical mapping of vaccine onto cheating and plagiarism, more broadly, may be both a FB conversation enabler and an argumentation deterrent. Apparently, the cognitive salient and socially biasing frame of plagiarism used to metaphorically explain the COVID-19 vaccine may both build and undermine the pro-vaccination arguments in a FB conversation. Thus, while it simplifies abstract knowledge related to vaccines and allows the audience (commentators to Mixich's FB post) to engage with a complex topic, the metaphor also amplifies polarization of an already highly polarized topic, thus fuelling anti-vaxxers' use of argumentation fallacies (e.g., ad-hominem) to disarm vaccination supporters.

