

# Case Study of Anthony Fauci During and Following COVID-19 Pandemic

Communication 698, Master's Project

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Submitted to Professor Gary Kreps

# Case Study of Anthony Fauci During and Following COVID-19 Pandemic

## □ **Statement of the Problem**

- Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, former head of the National Institute for Infectious Disease (NIAID, n.d.) and then Chief Medical Advisor to President Biden (White House, 22 August 2022) , became focal points of agreement and disagreement about healthcare in this pandemic.
- Focused on the COVID-19 time period: January 2020 to May 2023
- Given the importance of trust and reputation, especially in healthcare (Edelman, 2023), this content analysis study was designed to determine what was said about Dr. Fauci during this crisis and how health communicators can be more effective in future crises

## □ **Literature Review**

- **Reputation Management in Healthcare.** Reputation is the sine qua non of healthcare, and in science as well.
- **Reputation and Its Discontents in Healthcare and Healthcare Providers.** Losing reputation has its consequences for credibility and effectiveness for communicators.

# Case Anthony Fauci During and Following COVID-19 Pandemic: **Research Questions**

## □ **Research Questions**

■ **Background:** This correlational study does not hypothesize time-dependent or event-dependent changes in Fauci's reputation in the COVID pandemic (focused time period).

■ His reputation could change, to use a biomedical analogy, based on the “natural course” of a pandemic or perhaps through external factors such as the announcement and subsequent availability of vaccines, among other events.

■ I do not hypothesize causality but using quantitative and qualitative content analysis determine whether his reputation changed during the course of these three years with the hope that the results may yield suggestions for reputation management by future healthcare leaders when the inevitable infectious disease strikes (Fauci, 2022).

# Case Anthony Fauci During and Following COVID-19 Pandemic: **Research Questions**

## □ **Research Questions**

- RQ1: What types of newspaper posts concerned Dr. Fauci for
  - RQ1a. Sources of posts
  - RQ1b. Responses to originating posts
- RQ2. What themes were identified in Fauci posts
  - RQ2a. Supportive posts
  - RQ2b. Denigrating posts
- RQ3. What types of character attacks or reputational attacks can be identified and described (using Coombs, 2020).

# Anthony Fauci During and Following COVID-19 Pandemic: **Method**

## □ **Method**

- **Background:** As an aside, I initially wanted to use social media to assess the public's direct views of Dr. Fauci but could not obtain it so went to public communication with newspaper articles
- **Data**
  - Source: Convenience data of 150 available newspaper articles from the top eight newspapers by paid subscribers using search terms Anthony Fauci and name variants for the time frame, January 2020 until May 2023
    - National newspapers
    - Regional newspapers
    - One both national and regional

# Anthony Fauci During and Following COVID-19 Pandemic: **Method**

## □ **Method continued**

### ■ **Data continued**

- 150 randomly selected over this frame from George Mason University library system
  - The number selected seemed sufficient to develop the themes (no power analysis as effect size unknown and this is not a quantitative study)
  - Sampled within a newspaper until reached saturation on a theme, attempted to balance the number of articles for each newspaper
  - Scrapped previously used codebooks because of or poor fit and used automated textual analysis with LIWC-22 (Kane & van Swol, 2023) and content analysis with Atlast.ai (Soratto, Pires, & Friese, 2020)

# Anthony Fauci During and Following COVID-19 Pandemic: **Results**

## □ **Results by Research Question**

### ■ **RQ1: Identification of Type of Newspaper Article by Frequency**

- Almost two thirds of the one or two paragraph postings with the subject Anthony Fauci (selected to make a complete thought) were identified through placement in the news or general contribution area of the newspapers.
- However, 47 fell into other categories, often described so as to separate themselves from other types of content, such as “podcast column,” which was found once. Eight other identifications were found once. The author could not determine the type of content for seven entries, which subjectively seems to be remarkable.

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## Anthony Fauci During and Following COVID-19 Pandemic: **Results**

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Table 1: RQ1, Newspaper Article by Type

Analysis	3
News/Article	96
Article Politics	1
Article Sports	1
Briefing	1
Guest Essay	1
Interview	1
Opinion	17
Opinion Letter	1
Opinion Podcast	1
Perspective	1
Podcast	7
Podcast column	1
Unknown	7

# Anthony Fauci During and Following COVID-19 Pandemic: **Results**

- **Results by Research Question continued**
- **RQ2: Themes Identified in Fauci Posts**
- **Textual Analysis**
  - Individual words were the unit of analysis.
  - Results described verbally, then numerically with frequency tables and graphically with a word cloud.
  - 40 most frequently mentioned words are shown below in Table 2 and in the word cloud in Figure 1.
  - Search term “Anthony Fauci” with these eight primary American newspapers yielded 1677 unique words

# Anthony Fauci During and Following COVID-19 Pandemic: **Results**

## ■ **RQ2: Themes Identified in Fauci Posts**

### □ **Textual Analysis continued**

- Large majority of the postings included Fauci's first and last name, as expected
- His title of "dr" was mentioned 105 times, the third most frequent word, following "fauci" (183) and anthony (117). Frequencies quickly dropped to 60 with a long tail of low frequency words.

### □ **To summarize by textual content,**

- Dr. Fauci was the focus of the newspaper articles, followed by his title, "dr."
- Word frequency then quickly turned to the virus and the pandemic as subject areas, followed by breadth of concerns.
- Perhaps surprisingly, terms for former president Trump and current president Biden were found at the 32<sup>nd</sup> and 39<sup>th</sup> frequency, indicating that these two figures were not the primary concern.

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# Case Study of Anthony Fauci During and Following COVID-19 Pandemic

Word	Frequency
fauci	183
anthony	117
dr	105
said	60
infectious	58
national	45
diseases	41
pandemic	38
coronavirus	38
institute	37
director	31
top	29
covid-19	29
allergy	28
expert	28
president	26
health	26
disease	21
nation	21
country	19
states	18
house	17
people	17
public	17
white	17
told	16
vaccine	16
medical	15
monday	14
adviser	14
government	14
trump	14
tens	13
united	13
thousands	13
sunday	13
biden	13
chief	12
day	12

Table 2: Top 40 Word Frequency



# Fauci During and Following COVID-19 Pandemic: Results

- **RQ2a and RQ2b : Positive and Negative Themes Identified in Fauci Posts**
- Briefly, nine main or parent themes identified and presented first, followed some subthemes or child themes. Main themes listed alphabetically, with frequency in parenthesis,
  - Communication (100),
  - COVID-19 (179),
  - Diversity and Society (163),
  - Expertise (57),
  - General (128),
  - Politics (133),
  - Values (110),
  - Workforce dynamics (43),
  - Wuhan Lab (7).
- Importance of the issues by frequency, are COVID-19, Diversity and Society, Politics, General, Values, Expertise, and Wuhan Lab.

# Fauci During and Following COVID-19 Pandemic: Results

- **RQ2a and RQ2b : Positive and Negative Themes Identified in Fauci Posts continued**
- Briefly, nine themes illustrate RQ2A, positive comments, and RQ2B, negative comments or perspectives toward Dr. Fauci.
- RQ2a, Positive comments centered around his expertise.
- RQ2b, Negative comments questioned whether he had been in the job too long, his age (82 by end of 2022, when he retired from federal service) and questions about whether he was seeking attention for himself or had other, self-serving motivations for engaging in the COVID-19 pandemic for so long.

# Fauci During and Following COVID-19 Pandemic: Results

- **RQ3: Types of Character Attacks or Reputational Attacks Identified and Described**
- Dr. Fauci’s attempt at reputation repair or at least to defend himself in the face of name calling, motivation questioning, and challenges, such as Senator Rand Paul, also a physician, questioning Fauci’s credibility and trustworthiness.
- Dr. Fauci reportedly called another senator a “moron” in a not-so-dead microphone.
- Fauci asserted that he was only “following the science,” and on other occasions labelled misinformation toward biomedical research (and himself), asserting that following these “prescriptions” saved millions of lives through vaccinations and behavioral restrictions .
- In summary, it appears that Dr. Fauci used apologia and in at least one case resorted to attack to discredit his opponents, accusing Paul placing him and his family in danger by “kindling the crazies” (Finn, 2022, January 11).

# Fauci During and Following COVID-19 Pandemic: **Thematic Results**

- **RQ2 and RQ3 Thematic Analysis:**
- **Theme 1: Communication** (frequency 100).
  - General information about Dr. Fauci, such as his early years at NIH and mentoring by Dr. Sidney Wolff, an early director. It seemed to overall be more benign than the more critical or laudatory articles.
- **Theme 2: COVID-19** (179).
  - More straight forward than other themes, often providing Fauci's reporting of virus rates, such as the rate of infection increasing in spring 2020. Fauci comment to CNN, "I think we're heading in the right direction" which did not mean "total control" over the virus.
  - Illustrating complicated coding, also coded for COVID-19 Pessimism and under the Diversity and Society theme, uncertainty and pessimism subthemes.
- **Theme 3: Diversity and Society** (163).
  - Second highest in frequency, variety of subthemes, such as aging, differing perspectives on the virus, and criticism. For example, "It's Time, Dr. Fauci. A reader calls on the infectious disease expert to speak up and to resign from the president's task force." The Diversity theme featured various perspectives on criticism, such as resigning as well as "calling out" President Trump for what was termed misinformation.
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# Fauci During and Following COVID-19 Pandemic: Thematic Results

## □ RQ2 and RQ3 Thematic Analysis continued

□ **Theme 4: Expertise (57).** Dr. Fauci was almost uniformly acknowledged as a world expert on AIDS, and then COVID-19. For example, the follow quote acknowledges expertise, longevity and handling the pandemic, “Today, we speak with Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, the nation’s leading expert on infectious diseases, about his experience in the trenches of the government’s response to the coronavirus crisis. Dr. Fauci has had a long career as a public servant and has advised presidents of both parties during previous pandemics.”

□ **Theme 5: General (128).** General comments referred to “how things work” in Washington, DC, and in the government/politics, but often included other categories such as social media and general media. The following February 22, 2023, comment in a Los Angeles times opinion piece said a Fox News host could, “Cause a stir, get a TV show; 'Five' co-host Jesse Watters given own Fox News slot after anti-Fauci comments.”

□ **Theme 6: Politics (133).**

□ Subtheme of division in the country. One opinion writer opined that you knew whom “you voted for” by whether one favored or disagreed with Dr. Fauci and his positions.

□ Included personal attacks, waning days of the 2020 election, when then President Trump called Fauci “an idiot” and that “people were ‘tired’ of hearing about the virus.

# Fauci During and Following COVID-19 Pandemic: Thematic Results

## □ **RQ2 and RQ3 Thematic Analysis continued**

□ **Theme 7:** Values (110). The Values theme included some communication and general themes, as well as the career development of Dr. Fauci through the Dr. Sheldon Wolff introduction. That particular item was also found in the Influence Career and Workforce Diversity comments. Other Values items include reflection on Dr. Fauci for his many years of government service and the opportunity to serve humankind.

□ **Theme 8:** Workforce Dynamics (43).

□ An article which indirectly acknowledged aging by Dr. Fauci, comparing the age of the federal government workforce with the age of workers in society at large

□ **Theme 9:** Wuhan Lab (7).

□ Origins of the virus, and a few newspaper articles specifically mentioned that Fauci approved “gain of function” research, which possibly helped the Chinese virology lab in releasing the virus or causing it to be released.

□ A FOIA request of Fauci emails yielded what some saw a downplaying of the Chinese lab in production or release of the virus then that indicated for some a possible cover up.

# Fauci During and Following COVID-19 Pandemic: Summary

- **Summary**
- Three research questions and findings (types of newspaper articles, positive and negative Fauci words and themes, attempt at reputation repair)
- Most importantly was the singularity of focus upon Dr. Anthony Fauci during this time of COVID-19 pandemic, even after he left office.
- That expertise and laudatory public service of 38 years and seven presidents as NIAID director was at least in part undermined.
- He became the face of the pandemic with anger, attitudinal and contrary behaviors for some to vaccination mandates and behavioral restrictions such as social distancing and school closures.
- This study identified the types of positive and negative themes for Dr. Fauci and suggests how to identify negative themes for future health and healthcare scientists and communicators, how to build positive regard and reputation, and how to reduce the possibility of character attack in future health infections and emergencies

# Fauci During and Following COVID-19 Pandemic: Summary

## □ **Limitations**

### ■ **Sampling**

- Convenience sample of newspaper articles for a limited time period
- Do not know if this sample represents public at large

### □ **Time Frame**

- Again, this study may not represent Dr. Fauci from other times, not with this type of crisis

## □ **Implications and Applications**

### ■ ***Uncertainty***

- Many of the nine content categories point to uncertainty of COVID-19 in origin, course and outcome

# Fauci During and Following COVID-19 Pandemic: Summary

- **Implications and Applications continued**
- **Uncertainty continued**
  - One possibility is titrating the amount of information provided to the expertise of the audience or public (Kreps & Kriner, 2020)
  - Could model pandemics as a strategic **socially mediated health campaign**, complicated because it was a crisis (Jin & Austin, 2017). Expressing uncertainty throughout this process would seem to require assessing what the public knows and what they want to know, how risk is gauged, and how that risk can be turned into outrage.
  - Could conduct focus groups to determine what critics are saying and how their views can be addressed
- **Trustworthiness.** Difficult in a pandemic.

# Fauci During and Following COVID-19 Pandemic: Summary

## □ **Implications and Applications continued**

### ■ **Uncertainty**

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- Could conduct focus groups to determine what critics are saying and how their views can be addressed

□ **Trustworthiness.** Difficult in a pandemic. Needs assessment through focus groups and surveys.

# Fauci During and Following COVID-19 Pandemic: Summary

## □ **Implications and Applications continued**

### ▣ **Fatigue and Communication Fatigue**

- Some of this is inevitable so needs further assessment, as above.
- Consider Psychological Reaction Theory (PRT), which predicts anger and attitude reactions when intentions are thwarted (Quick, Shen, & Dillard, 2013).
- Again, separating policy from enforcement may help

### ▣ **Image Repair and Moral Outrage**

- Important theory is image repair (Benoit, 2014) and the Theory of Persuasive Attack (Benoit & Stein, 2021) can be used.
- “Live to fight another day” may be a good slogan or “don’t shoot yourself in the foot”

# Fauci During and Following COVID-19 Pandemic: Summary

## □ **Future Research**

- Future investigators may benefit from the content of both positive and negative postings for Dr. Fauci as well as the breadth and presumed lack of depth of most newspaper articles
- How can future healthcare scientists and government officials speak to their many publics (Botan, 2017; Botan and Sommerfeldt, 2023) while remaining true “to the science,” and at the same time express uncertainty, doubt and acknowledgement that actions require cocreation of meaning.
- Consider separating “the science” from the practice or policy.
- Research into the areas of management of uncertainty and psychological reactance to almost any restriction to perceived freedom.
- Research into message framing and source of message,
- Long standing “crises” could require a different framework than either crisis management or those of strategic health campaigns, perhaps a synthesis of skills and domains. COVID-19 provided a field test of how strategic and health campaign may look in the future.

# Fauci During and Following COVID-19 Pandemic: Results

## □ **Future Research Summary**

- Each of the implications listed above outlines a problem identified in the study results for Dr. Fauci and briefly proposes action or investigation which may address those gaps in the research for that problem (fatigue, trustworthiness, etc.). Where to start or the level of investigation could be from the individual, family, affiliated social group or even the society (Gupta, Jai, & Yadav, 2021).

## □ **Final Considerations**

- Future healthcare crises will come, future healthcare communicators can be more capable, more strategic in meeting the informational and emotional needs of the population at large.
- Old models, such as information deficit or command and control direction to publics, seemed to be largely discredited by the last almost four years, what will replace these models hopefully will be more cocreational.
- Future pandemic healthcare communicators will undoubtedly be tested and will probably receive much criticism. Dr. Fauci newspaper content surrounding Dr. Anthony Fauci and COVID-19 may lead to better preparation for health communicators' many roles. Directly measuring consumers' perspectives can lead to greater acceptance, engagement, and reduced negativity.

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