

“Healing is Coming”: COVID-19 Celebrity Rhetoric as Testimonials



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Abstract

This work considers: when a celebrity speaks about health on television or social media, how does the rhetoric coincide with U.S. values? According to Johanna Hartelius and Jennifer Asenas (2010), “in epideictic engagements, language is reinvigorated; it recurs and circulates, accumulating new meaning in each new instantiation” (p. 360). It is this type of recurring connection from a series of testimonials that informs this study, particularly concerning the COVID-19 vaccine and epideictic rhetoric. With crystallization and Aristotle’s notion of epideictic rhetoric as a framework, celebrity vaccination videos, news segments, and posts are analyzed, citing them as forms of testimonials. Ultimately, it can be argued an implicit rhetoric of values powerfully addresses the divided American beliefs and opinions about COVID-19, and in particular, the COVID-19 vaccinations. In reviewing a select number of case studies, this research analyzes celebrity rhetoric in connection with perceptions of COVID-19 vaccinations and how they may function as informal ad campaigns promoting themes of health and responsibility.

Key words: COVID-19, vaccines, celebrity, crystallization, rhetoric, Aristotle

Introduction

Healing is coming – Sandra Lindsay

These words were delivered by a New York City intensive care unit nurse after she became the first person in the United States to receive the COVID-19 vaccine. Lindsay’s televised vaccination (the first in the United States) functions as a testimonial. Given the charged political atmosphere, her words reflect that of then president-elect Joe Biden: “This is the time to heal in America” (as cited in McCammond, 2020, para. 1). The connection between Lindsay and Biden is rooted in epideictic rhetoric, which aims to evoke strong emotions and reinforce shared social values through persuasive language.

Victory speeches, award acceptances, or emotional commercials are examples of epideictic rhetoric in action, and can also be compared to persuasive forms of rhetoric. According to Johanna Hartelius and Jennifer Asenas (2010), “in epideictic engagements, language is reinvigorated; it recurs and circulates, accumulating new meaning in each new instantiation” (p. 360). It is this type of recurring connection from a series of testimonials that informs this study, particularly concerning the COVID-19 vaccine and epideictic rhetoric. In late 2021, the release of COVID-19 vaccinations drew skepticism and hesitation from some. Several types of rhetoric in the media filled the space where ad campaigns for the vaccine were scarce. Drawing from Aristotle’s notion of epideictic rhetoric, this work analyzes specific examples of celebrity vaccination testimonials. In viewing the celebrity rhetoric as testimonials, they may function as informal ad campaigns in support themes of health and responsibility regarding COVID-19 vaccinations. This article begins with a literature review of testimonials and vaccine hesitancy, the methods and research design, which then moves into a themed analysis of COVID-19 vaccine testimonials.

Literature Review

Kairos, the Context of Time and Place

Rhetoric can have several meanings, depending on context and usage. As defined by Aristotle, “rhetoric is a faculty of finding the available means of persuasion” (as cited in Garver, 2018, p. 33). Given the types of rhetoric, the audience may find emotional appeals to be moot, or to be effective. The speaker’s ethos (or credibility) may matter, or it may not (Garver, 2018). With epideictic rhetoric, display is essential. This type of rhetoric focuses on a display of praise and blame, and “features heavily in occasions such as dedication ceremonies, acceptance speeches and commencement addresses” (Atkins, 2018, p. 363). Because the notion of display is also part of celebrity appeals in the media, epideictic rhetoric may connect with the celebrity case studies reviewed throughout this research.

Testimonials are also steeped in persuasive rhetoric. As McNeill (2015) considers, it is not just the testimonial itself, but rather what happens “when testimony occurs in a particular place in time” (p. 312). When delivered by celebrities across media spaces, the place and time of a testimony can transform further. Celebrities may lack the credibility of professionals

associated with health, but their identification with audiences may heighten their message because "identification is a stronger predictor of attitudes than credibility" (Cohen et al., 2023, p. 107). The speaker in a testimonial may not detract from the inherent exigence. During a pandemic, that exigence may be heightened, as noted by what is communicated and how it is communicated. Ittefaq et al. (2023) posited that the trend of "COVID selfies" presented an encouragement of health in contrast to anti-vaxxers, based on a theory of normative conduct (p. 210). The celebrity testimonials cited throughout this research may similarly encourage audiences to normalize COVID-19 vaccinations. For many Americans, discourse on illness derives from celebrity testimonials, which tout what worked for them, indicating that it may work in a similar fashion for U.S. audiences.

To analyze these testimonials effectively, one must situate them within the established American hierarchy of values. In the context of U.S. public discourse, this hierarchy prioritizes individualism, civic responsibility, and scientific progressivism. As noted by scholars of American studies, these values often exist in tension; however, in times of national crisis, the rhetoric frequently shifts to emphasize the 'myth of the individual', or the idea that personal health choices are a primary form of patriotic duty. By defining this hierarchy, we can better discern how celebrity rhetoric translates clinical mandates into culturally significant performances of 'good citizenship' and 'national resilience.

The idea of celebrity can shift as easily as the definition of rhetoric or testimonial. As Friedman et al. (1976) describe, celebrities are "known to the public for his/her accomplishment in areas related to the product class endorsed" (p. 22). The product may or may not result in monetary gain for the celebrity, and may even result in perceived moral or status gains. For this study, the product would be any COVID-19 vaccine. Trivedi (2018) believes that celebrities are adored by audiences, and that their rhetoric can often be interpreted as a form of endorsement. These endorsements do not always have positive impacts. Roy et al. (2024) note the "vampire effect" of celebrity endorsements, which dispels audience interest in the product due to overexposure. Trivedi (2018) discusses how animal mascots were perceived as more effective than human celebrity endorsers in certain studies based in India. To overcome possible negative impacts of celebrity endorsements, Roy et al. (2024) reviews new methods from advertisers, including co-creation (or creating a brand with the celebrity). In an act comparable to co-creating the

product of COVID-19 vaccines, Dolly Parton was one celebrity who reportedly donated one million dollars to the Vanderbilt University Medical Center “to fund early research of possible treatments and cures” for COVID-19 in 2020 (Liao, 2021). In her social media post on X, Parton captioned the image of receiving a COVID-19 vaccination as a play on her song “Jolene”: “Vaccine, vaccine, vaccine, vaccine. I’m begging of you please don’t hesitate” (as cited in Liao, 2021). This testimonial from Parton can be perceived as a form of praise for the COVID-19 vaccinations. In this study, ‘celebrity’ is defined as individuals ‘known to the public for accomplishments’ in various fields whose rhetoric functions as an informal endorsement. In the U.S. context, these figures often reflect a ‘hierarchy of values’ centered on the ‘myth of the individual’ and the pursuit of status, fitness, and social connectivity.

Although epideictic rhetoric may focus on more traditional forms of communication (speeches), the celebrity rhetoric reviewed can be considered for their attributions of praise or blame for different facets of the COVID-19 vaccine. Much of the rhetoric referenced throughout this research hail from different media spaces: television and social media platforms. The wide dissemination of these testimonials may elevate a TV clip or social media post. While a clip of a non-celebrity like Sandra Lindsay can gain viral notoriety, this research focuses primarily on celebrity figures. The rationale for these specific selections is detailed in the Methods section. The availability of media rhetoric about COVID-19 created informal celebrity testimonials, possibly to assert or combat the coinciding vaccine hesitancy value as found in the U.S.

Vaccine Hesitancy and Lack of Vaccine Ads

Vaccine hesitancy existed well before COVID-19. Noni Macdonald examines the term “vaccine hesitancy” based on the SAGE group’s 2012 definition. The analysis includes models and public health implications. Based on the collective research, vaccine hesitancy can vary across groups, but is only experienced by a small percentage of the population (per the article’s release in 2015). In 2011, the WHO EURO Vaccine Communications Working Group identified vaccine hesitancy using three categories: complacency, confidence, and convenience (Macdonald, 2015, p. 2). Citizens marked by these categories may be more susceptible to vaccine hesitancy. More importantly, “vaccine hesitancy may be present in situations where vaccination uptake is low because of system failures, e.g. stockouts, limited availability of vaccination services (time, place, etc.), curtailment of vaccine services in the presence of

conflict or natural disaster” (Macdonald, 2015, p. 2). Using these assessments as a guide, vaccine hesitancy seems to have amplified as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing public health messaging (or initial lack thereof) surrounding vaccination supplies and dissemination.

Through the end of 2020 and in early 2021, there was a lack of vaccine supply in the U.S. As such, demand was greater than supply, and there was no need to advertise. However, as supply increased from March into April and May, there was still a lack of television or social ads discussing the vaccine. That is not to say there were zero ads, like those from the Ad Council. On their main landing page for Coronavirus, the 2020 Ad Council offered three messages to the public: Mask Up, Mental Health, and Social Distancing. These are described as “critical messages to help educate the public during this unprecedented time” (Ad Council, 2020, para. 1). Though the messages are important, it is worth noting that the Ad Council does not feature a campaign about any vaccination facts or availability. As Macdonald (2015) notes, in a natural disaster (like the COVID-19 pandemic), vaccine hesitancy may arise, especially when combined with limited services and supply. While this research focuses on the persuasive power of pro-vaccination celebrity testimonials, these artifacts exist in a rhetorical tension with anti-vaccination discourse. For example, ‘COVID selfies’ and public testimonials serve to normalize the vaccine as a health-positive action, directly contrasting with the skepticism and ‘complacency’ often found in hesitant groups.

Without adequate notices on either, the public is left uninformed on the overall state of the vaccination program across the U.S. Still, the Ad Council does offer a link for additional information ([coronavirus.gov](https://www.coronavirus.gov)), which includes vaccine FAQs. The [coronavirus.gov](https://www.coronavirus.gov) website is informational, with referrals to other links, but lacks the positive flair for messaging as expressed by the Ad Council. Public health depends on the public being persuaded to take vaccines based on themes related to cultural values. To some extent, this role was arguably fulfilled by celebrity testimonials about COVID-19 vaccinations. As such, the rhetoric is worthy of greater analysis.

Methodology

This article will use the theory of epideictic rhetoric to inform the study of COVID-19 vaccination testimonials. Per Hartelius and Asenas (2010), “epideictic speakers reenergize language by bringing it into different

contexts”, (p. 361). For this research, U.S. celebrities serve as the epideictic speakers, sharing their testimonials of praise and blame for COVID-19 vaccines. Their language about COVID-19 vaccination was shared across television and social media and underscored various elements and beliefs held by U.S. audiences. Videos with spoken discourse were transcribed to facilitate thematic coding and the identification of specific 'units of meaning' or 'chunks' of rhetorical data. The testimonials were analyzed in multiple coding passes (open, axial, and selective) to refine the emerging themes and ensure the consistency of the categorical rules. The selection of testimonials followed purposive sampling, focusing on discursive artifacts that were most relevant to the research questions rather than attempting an exhaustive survey. When considering the vaccination rhetoric and reflections of U.S. culture, notions of imitation and reality may interconnect with the testimonials.

The term “testimonials” will refer to any formal or informal COVID-19 pharmaceutical advertisements and campaigns as circulated by celebrities. Data analysis will consist of a collective case-study approach in which several testimonials are examined. This will be a rhetorical analysis in understanding what is said, and how certain words, phrases, and tones reflect U.S. culture and values. More specifically, in reviewing the testimonials, this work will also be assessing perspectives to consider:

- *What dominant U.S.-based values and rhetorical themes characterize celebrity COVID-19 vaccination testimonials?*
- *How do these celebrities construct a rhetorical "ideal audience" (the "for whom") to negotiate vaccine hesitancy and civic responsibility?*

U.S. audiences may have viewed several testimonials about the COVID-19 vaccine. As such, they may not consider the implications of the rhetoric therein. Collectively, if the testimonials are filtered through the theory of epideictic rhetoric, their relevance in addressing particular themes may become clearer. This article study will review any possible connections between testimonials for COVID-19 vaccines and reflections of American culture. For U.S. audiences, this might make a difference in diffusing ideas of medical stigma attached to receiving the COVID-19 vaccine. More specifically, the study may reflect how receiving the vaccine is part of American culture.

In terms of scope, this article will focus on testimonials from entertainers, prominent health officials, politicians, social media influencers, and government, for-profit, and nonprofit entities. At the same time, a study by Brent Rolins and Niles Bhutada (2014) found that audiences were not

necessarily swayed by the use of celebrities in advertising (as previously mentioned in the literature review). Still, their findings indicate:

While consumers paid more attention to the celebrity-containing ads and viewed them as more credible, this did not translate into significant effects on the outcome dependent variables of consumer attitudes toward the ad and company, behavioral intentions and information search behavior. As previous literature has suggested, level of disease state involvement was a significant predictor of respondent outcomes. (Rollins & Bhutada, 2014, para. 3)

While there are limitations to studying celebrity advertisements, it is their media prominence which makes them easy to find and worth studying in terms of rhetorical manifestation. This analysis will not include pharmaceutical advertising of cosmetic products and non-FDA approved products. While the proliferation of such advertising is of interest, it is not relevant to the scope of this article. What is of greater interest is the function of rhetoric in vaccination testimonials from celebrities across informal media spaces.

Given that celebrities are not medical doctors, the persuasion of celebrity pathography must derive from some other source. Further, they spur the public to act by seeking medical guidance or treatment through their applications of praise and blame. Through these research methods, the relevance of their rhetoric against the backdrop of COVID-19 and vaccinations was examined.

Research Design and Crystallization

The question remains: by what *specific means* or *methods* can this work make sense of contemporary celebrity COVID-19 testimonials? In order to formulate questions of inquiry for this project, the process of *immersion/crystallization*, as described by Laura Ellingson, was followed. Using the crystallization method, I engaged with the data from the stance of the researcher, mixed with a personal pursuit for more information of the COVID-19 vaccination programs.

In the early stages of this project, the research involved an immersive analysis of available social media artifacts and news coverage of COVID-19 vaccine approvals and implementation. For the purposes of forming research

questions in this case, the interpretations need not be final or conclusive. Ellingson (2014) believes:

Crystallization brings together multiple methods and multiple genres to enrich findings and to highlight the inherent limitations of all knowledge. That is, each account provides pieces of a meaning puzzle but never completes it, rendering the impossibility of total understanding more apparent. (p. 446)

My provisional research questions focused mostly on the distinction between categories of “celebrity” (e.g., entertainers, politicians, athletes, and community leaders and representatives) and the various media or genres of testimonials and vaccination documentation or performance (e.g., *Twitter*, *Facebook*, cable television, print news sources, and online news sources). As Ellingson (2014) notes, “crystallization offers a framework for conducting qualitative and mixed-method research that invites researchers to examine relational topics using multiple lenses and a variety of genres” (p. 442). This focus still left plenty of potential testimonials, and crystallization helped to separate the types of testimonials being reviewed. Ada Marie Kathleen (2024) suggests that crystallization leads to “deep immersion”, and this process helps a “researcher begin to identify patterns, themes, and concepts that ‘crystallize’ or emerge from the data” (para. 3). Similarly, Jeffrey Borkan (2022) cites the process of immersion as “an inductive, iterative process for identifying themes, categories, and patterns” (p. 785). Immersion in the COVID-19 testimonials revealed themes to help gain an understanding of recurring phrases and sentiment in the data.

This led to ideas on “types of narratives/levels of discourse”, types of “celebrity identities”, and themes in which each testimonial might fit best. Based on an initial sampling of testimonials, the themes in the Table 1 helped organize the representative cases into specific areas of concern that form the foundation of the remaining research. This overview of discourse levels includes over 90 interviews, testimonials, videos (performances), text-only, audio-only, visual (picture) only. These types were collected across several mediums, like social media, news articles, websites, and more. Each medium and discourse level differs in what Jennifer Jackl (2016) cites as “narrative adaptation”, or “the process narrators embark upon when deciding what version of a story to tell a particular audience” (p. 263). While not all types of crystallization are the same, I employed the patched form. Ellingson (2009)

describes patched crystallization as a form that “offers the benefit of including multiple genres without having to make them fit closely together” (p. 113). Patched crystallization allows for a fuller understanding of a topic within these spaces while encouraging flexibility. In this way, the review of mediums and discourse would vary, but would not largely deviate from Table 2 (see below). To inform the base of the crystallization method, the research was further distilled through the modes of a collective case study approach.

Collective Case Study

In using a *collective case study* approach, different discursive testimonials were selected as smaller cases within the overall case of the COVID-19 vaccination ads. The rationale for why the specific case studies were chosen is reviewed in the Results section. Other than the determination that the discourses selected must have been produced during or following the approval of the vaccinations in the U.K. and U.S. in late 2020, there was no end-date for eligible inclusion or analysis; additional testimonials discovered at any point during this research project were eligible to be selected and analyzed if they were deemed relevant to the study. The objects selected for this case study are several celebrity testimonials for differing COVID-19 vaccines. The goal of this study was not to fully survey and exhaustively characterize all discourses concerning the COVID-19 vaccines. Rather, as testimonials were interpreted according to each of the questions of inquiry, only relevant discourses were included in the final analysis.

Results and Discussion

Thematic Overview

Turning from context and theory, this section will detail the celebrity testimonials concerning the COVID-19 vaccines. In reviewing the testimonials, themes emerged and discursive fragments (or stand-out quotes) were chosen to represent them. This began with sorting (or grouping) over 90 testimonials based on categories (Table 1). Initially, testimonials were identified based on medium, like talk shows, news interviews, YouTube videos, social media posts, and more. Then, types of discourse were considered, like interviews, videos, text-only, audio-only, and visual only. Types of celebrities were also identified based on commonalities, like musicians/comedians, athletes, social media influencers, politicians, and more. Lastly, immersion in the rhetoric produced initial categories of U.S. cultural values. Though cultural values may vary by

audience, they can also vary by culture. Tansey et al. (1990) reviewed cross-cultural differences when researching ads, and found that “values provide the context for interpreting ads” (p. 31). As the data points used in this study come from celebrities and can be considered testimonials, they are similar to advertisements, and require context for better interpretation. Identifying a set of U.S. based values (such as individualism, civic duty, and scientific progress) helped create a baseline to better discern a grouping of rhetoric from over 90 testimonials.

Table 1. Thematic Grouping of Testimonials by Type

Groupings based on immersion			
Sites/Space/Medium:	Types of “Narratives”/Discourse Levels:	“Celebrity” Types/Identities:	Themes:
Talk Shows	Interview	Entertainer (actor/musician/comedian)	Life/Death
News Interviews		Athlete	Health/Illness
Print Journalism	Video (performance)	Social Media Influencer	Responsibility/Irresponsibility
Websites	Text-only	Famous Politician	Age/Elderly/Youth
YouTube	Audio-only	Community Leader/Representative	Parents/Children/Family
Social Media	Visual (picture) only	Healthcare Worker	U.S. Patriotism
Reddit			Legality/Illegality/Rules/Laws
Live Events			Pain/Discomfort/Lack of Pain/Lack of Discomfort
Podcasts			Stigma

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Table 2 illustrates how some of the phrases were coordinated by the medium of discourse and matching themes based on rhetoric. The first set of examples on the left column of Table 2 is labeled “Talk”, and refers to statements made from talk show hosts. The second set of examples labeled “News” references news interviews featuring a celebrity. The third set of examples labeled “Sites” denotes discursive fragments from news and entertainment websites. The fourth set of examples labeled “Social” displays relevant text from celebrity social media posts on sites like X, *Facebook*, and more. The fifth example, “Celeb” details posts from celebrity activists. Finally, “Live Events” includes quotes from events recorded live and shared on networks like C-Span. Though Table 2 displays only 18 testimonials, as aforementioned, there were over 90 testimonials surveyed. These 18 examples were collected and displayed via Table 2 based on themes from Table 1, and patterns of rhetoric noted in the data based on type of testimonial and various celebrity identities (see Table 1).

Table 2. Grouping of COVID-19 Celebrity Testimonials by Phrases, Themes, and Medium

<i>ID</i>	Discursive Fragments	Matching Themes	Medium of Discourse
<i>Talk 1</i>	"As if we didn't have enough problems trying to get these shots, a group of anti-vaxxers gathered at a vaccination site"	Trust, Distrust, & Stigma Responsibility & Irresponsibility/ U.S. Patriotism	Entertainment Talk Shows
<i>Talk 2</i>	"I'll take that shot in my eyeball if it means I can go to dinner".	Health & Illness/Life & Death/Pain & Discomfort	Entertainment Talk Shows
<i>Talk 3</i>	"If he [Coronavirus Kenny] sees three-fourths of his shadow, it's an old-person Thunderdome: two olds enter, one old leaves"	Age, Elderly, Youth/Life & Death	Entertainment Talk Shows
<i>News 1</i>	"[Arnold] put that needle down. Thank you"/ "[Biden after he got the shot] I'm doing this to demonstrate that people should be prepared when it's available"	Responsibility & Irresponsibility/ Health & Illness/ Pain & Discomfort/U.S. Patriotism/Trust	Original News Interviews
<i>News 2</i>	"I've had people that have died that I know"	Health & Illness/Life & Death/Parents, Children, and Family	Original News Interviews
<i>News 3</i>	"...these women believe the vaccine could affect their ability to get pregnant". / "What if there is something in there that wasn't tested? Will it cause females to be sterile?"	Trust, Distrust, & Stigma/Health & Illness/Life & Death/Pain & Discomfort/Legality & Illegality	Original News Interviews
<i>Sites 1</i>	"we expect the U.S. to return to a pre-pandemic normal any time soon"	Rules & Law/Trust, Distrust, & Stigma/ Life & Death	News and Entertainment Websites
<i>Sites 2</i>	"This is also an opportunity to promote the importance of vaccination and appropriate health practices, including wearing masks in public settings/enable the league to host fans and the vaccinated health care workers in a safe and responsible way"	Rules & Law/Trust, Distrust, & Stigma/Life & Death/ Life & Death / Responsibility & Irresponsibility/ U.S. Patriotism	News and Entertainment Websites

<i>Sites 3</i>	“The vaccine rollout is taking too long, and this will continue to cost the lives of those who are unable to avoid potentially deadly exposure because they can’t afford to not work or because their work involves exposure to the disease”.	Life & Death/ Responsibility & Irresponsibility/ Trust, Distrust, & Stigma	News and Entertainment Websites
<i>Social 1</i>	“Getting a Covid-19 vaccine will help keep you from getting Covid-19/these side effects may affect daily activities, and may make you feel like you have the flu/continue to wear a mask, avoid crowds and stay 6 feet away from others, and wash your hands often”.	Health & Illness/ Responsibility & Irresponsibility/ Rules & Law	Social Media
<i>Social 2</i>	“supported health and economic relief efforts/we’ve removed more than 12 million pieces of content on Facebook and Instagram containing misinformation that could lead to imminent physical harm/And we reached over 26 million people with our public figure campaign encouraging people to #WearAMask, resulting in a 7-point increase in people reporting that wearing a mask in public is very or extremely important”	Health & Illness/ Trust, Distrust, & Stigma/ Responsibility & Irresponsibility/ Rules & Law/Pain & Discomfort	Social Media
<i>Social 3</i>	“increased ventilation can help protect your school and reduce the spread of #COVID19/increase ventilation by: • Opening windows • Using portable air cleaners • Improving building-wide filtration • Considering outdoor classes and outdoor lunch/Verified COVID-19 vaccination helps protect you from getting sick from COVID-19/We don’t yet know whether getting a #COVID19 vaccine will prevent you from spreading the virus to other people, even if you don’t get sick yourself./As soon as a COVID-19 vaccine became available to her, Jessie got vaccinated, adding one more layer of protection to stay safe”.	Health & Illness/ Trust, Distrust, & Stigma/ Rules & Law/Pain & Discomfort/ Responsibility & Irresponsibility	Social Media

<i>Celeb 1</i>	<p>"There is a real concern with this new virus and the [greater] severity of the potential outcome [due to being HIV-positive], that I would be facing potential death after surviving so many years", said Wagner, who felt vaccination could be lifesaving./"They wanted to put us on an island and forget about us". He explained that it was the very fear of death that drove activists to take action".</p>	<p>Health & Illness/ Life & Death/U.S. Patriotism/ Rules & Law</p>	<p>Celebrity Activists</p>
<i>Celeb 2</i>	<p>"All medical procedures require informed consent. Vaccination is no different, but the reality is vaccines are routinely administered without informing the recipient of severe and acknowledged risks".</p>	<p>Rules & Law/Legality & Illegality/ Trust, Distrust, & Stigma</p>	<p>Celebrity Activists</p>
<i>Celeb 3</i>	<p>"While some white Americans are hesitant about the efficacy of the vaccines because of their fast-paced development, /A number of Black people across the country are refusing the vaccine due to the long and often violent history between the medical system and the Black community. /One of the most notable reasons behind the distrust is the infamous Tuskegee syphilis experiment, conducted from 1932 to 1972./"I've organized rallies with hundreds of people and I've never wore a mask", said Fidel. "I still interact with people daily".</p>	<p>Health & Illness/ Life & Death/ Trust, Distrust, & Stigma/Rules & Law/Diversity (Gender & Race)</p>	<p>Celebrity Activists</p>
<i>Live Events 1</i>	<p>"addressing these disparities is critical"</p>	<p>Diversity (Gender & Race)/ Life & Death</p>	<p>C SPAN</p>
<i>Live Events 2</i>	<p>"Literally, this is about saving lives"</p>	<p>Life & Death</p>	<p>C SPAN</p>
<i>Live Events 3</i>	<p>"My number one priority is getting the vaccine in people's arms"</p>	<p>U.S. Patriotism/ Health & Illness/ Life & Death/ Trust, Distrust, & Stigma</p>	<p>C SPAN</p>

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Through immersion, themes emerged based on the phrases and tone. These themes were oft repeated, and can be considered representative of U.S. culture and values. As previously mentioned, this will be a rhetorical analysis of how certain words, phrases, and tones reflect U.S. culture in celebrity testimonials. Rather than break down the rhetoric based on medium (television, social media, visual, and more), select case studies will be discussed based on the rhetorical examples reviewed. While reviewing several testimonials, there were recurring themes, either in implications, ethos, language, and other factors. To illustrate these thematic clusters, the analysis begins with the formal, institutional rhetoric of Sandra Lindsay, whose televised vaccination serves as a foundational case study in the intersection of clinical authority and national civic duty. Following this, the research explores more informal, peer-to-peer testimonials to contrast institutional messaging with relatable, experience-based rhetoric. For example, *Saturday Night Live (SNL)* is known for its political satire or commentary on recent events, and a testimonial featuring discussion of COVID-19 and vaccinations was chosen for further analysis. With X (formerly *Twitter*), a post can gain popularity based on relevance, content, and other factors. Based on the mention of COVID-19 and vaccinations, a post from Chelsea Handler was chosen for further analysis. DeSantis's media appearances have garnered national coverage in major outlets such as *CNN* and *The Washington Post*, justifying his inclusion as a figure of national rhetorical influence. All four case studies also represent different segments of various types of discourse: television sketch comedy, social media post, and televised news segment. Altogether, the relevance of unique case studies will be reviewed as they relate to discussing health concerns in the U.S., vaccinations, and COVID-19. While these tables provide a quantitative snapshot, the following case studies illustrate how these values function rhetorically through specific themes.

Civic Duty and National Resilience

As the case studies and other testimonials illustrate, COVID-19 vaccination and acceptance have become dramatized through the narrative of celebrities. Through public media and dissemination, this rhetoric took the form of testimonials. This research argues that the underlying rhetoric of values implicit in such testimonials powerfully contributes to relaying themes of responsibility (or civic duty) and health through celebrity influence.

While the Introduction established Sandra Lindsay's vaccination as a milestone event, a closer rhetorical analysis of the discursive artifacts surrounding this moment reveals a deep alignment with the American hierarchy of values. As an intensive care unit nurse, Lindsay's *ethos* is multifaceted, representing both the clinical authority of the healthcare system and the vulnerability of the frontline worker. In this section, her rhetoric is analyzed not merely as a news item, but as a deliberate performance of civic duty that utilizes *pathos* to transform medical anxiety into national hope. Unlike the informal celebrity testimonials discussed later, Lindsay's rhetoric is grounded in institutional patriotism, where her body becomes a site of public proof for the efficacy and safety of the vaccine.

The televised nature of the event, featuring a sterile clinical backdrop juxtaposed with the palpable emotional relief in Lindsay's tone, functions as a visual testimonial of scientific trust. By stating she feels "hopeful" and "relieved", Lindsay utilizes a rhetoric of communal resilience that effectively shifts the focus from individual side-effect concerns to the collective benefit of ending the pandemic. This performance bridges the gap between scientific progressivism and civic responsibility, framing the medical act as a prerequisite for national recovery. Lindsay's testimonial reinforces the value of the individual as a guardian of the collective public health, utilizing the emotional weight of the pandemic's end to evoke a sense of relief and communal hope in the viewer. While Lindsay leverages the *ethos* of a frontline worker to foster communal trust, the inclusion of artifacts featuring Governor Ron DeSantis (Case Study 2) illustrates a more policy-driven *ethos*. In these instances, the rhetoric moves beyond individual relief to frame vaccination as a logistical triumph and a marker of state-level resilience. By analyzing DeSantis alongside Lindsay, it becomes evident that the American hierarchy of values is defended both through the emotional labor of the healthcare professional and the authoritative, results-oriented discourse of the elected official, both of whom categorize the vaccine as a tool for restoring national normalcy.

Case study 2 offers an extended Fox & Friends segment live from Florida. Political celebrity and Florida Governor Ron DeSantis sits in the home of an elderly veteran receiving the vaccine (Figure 1). By appearing in a citizen's home, DeSantis could be trying to appeal to average viewers by seeming more accessible in an appeal to pathos. One of the news anchors remarks "The state of Florida is making house calls!" (as cited in Lanum, 2021,

0:10). DeSantis acknowledges that not every Florida senior citizen can travel to a wellness center.

DeSantis speaks positively of the successful vaccine distribution to Florida seniors, which was expected to reach 2 million that day. The Fox News headline beneath DeSantis highlights Florida's gains by stating "Florida leads the nation in vaccinating seniors" (as cited in Lanum, 2021, 0:08). With a phrase like "lead the nation", the segment could be relying on the theme of patriotism, while also relying on the theme of age/elderly with the phrase "vaccinating seniors".

Figure 1. Ron DeSantis visits elderly citizen receiving vaccine shown on Fox News.2020



Property of Fox.

Additionally, by including a senior citizen (94-year-old Vern Cummings) in the testimonial, DeSantis connects the themes of *health* and *wellness* and *again age/elderly* with this rhetoric. Behind Cummings, two gloved and masked health officials stand ready to administer the Pfizer vaccine. Their use of gloves and masks helps inspire ethos (or credibility) as healthcare professionals, and again connects to themes of health, wellness, and responsibility. DeSantis also describes at length his pride and gratitude for the service of Florida's veterans who had also been vaccinated in various parts of the state (specifically naming Holocaust survivors in south Florida and Bay of Pigs Veterans with the Cuban Americans in Miami). In so doing, he evokes a common theme among the vaccination narratives and interviews, *patriotism*, by connecting the veteran receiving the vaccination with implications of duty and responsibility to protect the country and each other.

In other words, this patriotic *responsibility* is highlighted both through military service and through accepting COVID vaccination.

Collective and individual action reflect on responsibility. Discursive fragments from Table 2 demonstrate this connection, as evidenced by this quote: “If the majority of us don’t get it [the vaccine], it won’t work as well”. The words ‘majority’ and ‘work’ imply that efficacy is contingent on high percentages of vaccinated populations, like with herd immunity. Haley Randolph and Luis Barreiro (2020) describe herd immunity as “herd immunity provides indirect protection to susceptible individuals by minimizing the probability of an effective contact between a susceptible individual and an infected host” (p. 740). Additionally, they note how mass vaccination campaigns or natural immunity from pathogen contact are the only two ways to reach this threshold. From the vantage point of overstated irresponsibility, natural immunity is the best path for herd immunity. Randolph and Barreiro (2020) discuss how mass infection would occur, leading to many casualties. Still, in real-world situations, herd immunity is often not achieved (Randolph & Barreiro, 2020), no matter the presence or lack of responsibility. The testimonials often frame vaccination as a ‘patriotic responsibility’, linking individual health choices to a broader U.S. value system of national duty and community protection, as seen in the framing of veterans receiving the dose.

As illustrated in Table 1, the themes of ‘Civic Duty’ and ‘Scientific Trust’ appeared in a large portion of the analyzed artifacts. These values are not merely abstract; they are operationalized through specific rhetorical performances that lean heavily on *ethos*. For instance, the testimonials with Lindsay (Case Study 1) and DeSantis (Case Study 2) serve as a primary example of this intersection. By televising the vaccinations, the rhetoric shifts from a private medical act to a public performance of national resilience. This aligns with the ‘American hierarchy of values’ by framing the individual’s choice as a necessary contribution to the collective safety of the U.S. populace.

Individual Experience and Relatable Risk

The thematic clusters identified in Table 2 highlight a shift from institutional authority toward a rhetoric of individual experience and relatable risk. While Table 1 focused on broad cultural values, this section analyzes how specific discursive fragments from Case Studies 3 and 4 operationalize these themes. By prioritizing personal narrative over clinical data, these testimonials

leverage a decentralized form of *ethos*, one rooted in the celebrity's perceived authenticity and shared vulnerability. This approach effectively translates complex public health mandates into relatable, individualistic choices that align with American values of personal autonomy and experiential knowledge.

The third testimonial (Case Study 3) discusses health concerns like side effects of the COVID-19 vaccine. According to the CDC (2025), common side effects include fever and fatigue, which are often framed in public discourse as evidence of an active immune response. Reportedly, patients receiving COVID-19 vaccinations experienced minimal or no after-effects, while others had flu-like symptoms- fever, chills, muscle aches, and tiredness. These symptoms and the comparison to the flu have persisted into the second doses and booster shots. In a "Weekend Update" interview between anchor Michael Che and "Willie" (Keanon Thompson) appeared on *SNL* days after the vaccine was approved by the FDA in December 2020 (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. *SNL* Weekend Update. December 20, 2020



Property of NBC.

Initially, Che (*SNL*, 2020) announces that “the vaccine is rolling out with over 1,000 Americans taking it this week. But, I don’t know guys, I’m still feeling skeptical” (0:04-0:07). The term “rolling out” is indicative of the theme of *patriotism*, while the statistics cited (“1000 Americans taking it”) is a form of *logos*. By using phrasing like “guys”, Che is relying on informal language to appeal to the audience. Likewise, he shares sentiment to display a commonality with some audience members with “I’m still feeling skeptical”.

This admission of skepticism could also relate to themes of *life* and *death*, along with *pain* and *discomfort*.

Then, Che (SNL, 2020) introduces Thomas as "my neighbor, Willie" (0:10). In presenting Thomas as a neighbor, the ethos (or credibility) of Thomas is boosted because he is someone Che knows personally. As "Willie", Thompson joins the segment in a green sweater and grey wig. He wears a smile throughout most of the segment, perhaps to invoke that of a well-meaning senior citizen (which again invokes ethos and perhaps pathos). Thompson (SNL, 2020) emphasizes how "the vaccine is a Christmas miracle" (0:20). This attempt to connect the vaccine with the Christmas holiday and the concept of a miracle could be an effort to dispel the theme of *stigma* in seeking the vaccination.

Thompson satirizes various dangers New York residents face, like drugs and violent crimes. Throughout, Che chimes in with how he is still skeptical of the vaccine, with Thompson agreeing that he was skeptical, too, at first. Later, Che asks Thompson if he is afraid of the COVID-19 vaccine side effects. Thompson replies, "at most, it makes you a little sleepy" (SNL, 2020, 1:16). Based on his earlier words, Thompson's rhetoric connects to the theme of *health* by implying worries about vaccine side-effects can be dismissed. Put another way, the 'Willie' segment employs a rhetoric of satirical dismissal, where the perceived 'dangers' of the vaccine (side effects like sleepiness) are framed as insignificant when compared to the hyperbolic, everyday dangers of urban life.

Regarding vaccines, the theme of health and illness become linked. As Sheezan Nezami (2021) suggests, "the vaccines do not guarantee 100% protection from the virus, but curb the impact of the virus on one's body and reduce the chances of severe symptoms, hospitalization, and death" (para. 1). Nezami might agree that there is a connection between levels of health and vaccination status. A few of the discursive fragments from the data (see Table 2) align with this mode of thinking. To start, "If you don't feel it, does that mean you're not getting the full effects of it [the vaccine]?" Words like 'feel' and 'effects' imply worry over vaccine after-effects and efficacy. Reportedly, some patients had minimal or no after-effects, while others had flu-like symptoms—fever, chills, muscle aches. Other health or illness testimonials from Table 2 included: "...these women believe the vaccine could affect their ability to get pregnant". The words 'vaccine' and 'ability' may be paired to raise the suspicion that the vaccine hinders fertility. This is reminiscent of the U.S. rhetoric about vaccinations for school-age children being supposedly linked

with autism. This historical anxiety surrounding vaccination side effects provides the necessary context for Handler's specific rhetorical strategy, in which she leverages her personal history of known 'risky' behaviors to minimize medical uncertainty and reframe the vaccine as a comparatively minor concern.

The fourth testimonial (Case Study 4) also appeared in mid-December of 2020, depicting a tweet (Figure 3) from Handler on X. The Handler Tweet received over 1.7 thousand retweets, and over 39 thousand likes. The tweet includes text and an image. The image is of Handler, presumably at a party. She is the only person featured in the image, and is laughing and possibly falling over with something like a cigarette in her hands. Her eyes are closed, and the image promotes a carefree attitude. Handler (2020) appeals to her social media followers and compares the risk of the COVID-19 vaccine to partying in her '20s by stating: "If you partied with me when I was in my 20's, don't worry about what's in the vaccine". The rhetoric "don't worry about what's in the vaccine" connects to the theme of *health* based on implications of supposed alcohol, drugs, or choices made in youth.

Figure 3. Vaccine Chelsea Handler Tweet. December 2020



Screengrab from Twitter.

With the phrasing, “You’ll be fine”, Handler may be relying on ethos. As a long-time comedian and public figure, Handler may expect audiences to trust her at her word. By stating, “you’ll be fine”, she is extending this credibility to the perceived safety of the vaccine. Handler utilizes a rhetoric of comparative risk, where she juxtaposes the unknown contents of the vaccine with the known ‘risky’ behaviors of her youth (partying, drugs, alcohol). By suggesting that if audiences survived the latter, they will be ‘fine’ with the former, she uses an informal, experience-based ethos to minimize medical anxiety.

Similar to the “Willie” clip from Case Study 3, the Handler rhetoric supposes that audiences have survived much worse and that the COVID-19 vaccination may (by comparison) be safe. Additionally, the rhetoric connects to the theme of *responsibility* based on the mention of age (“my 20’s”) and the supposition of Handler becoming older and more responsible. Handler is known among her fans to be a prolific partier, reportedly skipping the SATs to attend a party (Vulture Editors, 2018). Given the noted “vaccine hesitancy” among U.S. citizens, Handler’s tweet may have dispelled her followers’ anxiety about the COVID-19 vaccine and safety. This illustrates the finding in Table 2 regarding the use of ‘Relatable Risk’ to build trust with hesitant audiences, effectively shifting the rhetoric from medical expertise to shared personal experience.

Being vaccinated or not may resonate with the theme of how responsible or irresponsible patients are viewed. Not only that, but in the case of personal versus State responsibility, there are other factors. Barbara Preloznjak (2018) points out:

if we accept that the state have [sic] a moral responsibility to protect its citizens from communicable diseases as external threats to public health, the state should also have a moral responsibility for all losses of individual vaccine health impairment as protection of individual benefits public health. (p. 52)

Consequently, there is a perceived link between State and personal responsibility. For other discursive fragments reviewed, personal responsibility was more important. Some were accused of using influence: “[celebrities] leveraging their clout and connections to be the first to get inoculated”. Words like ‘leverage’, ‘clout’, and ‘first’ can be interpreted as accusatory and lacking responsibility for others. The following discursive

fragment contrasts this: "My number one priority is getting the vaccine in people's arms". Words like 'priority' and 'people' indicate elevated levels of worry for others and can be coded as responsible.

Theoretical Synthesis: The Mediatized Celebrity Environment

The convergence of celebrity status and digital media infrastructure creates a unique rhetorical exigency that distinguishes these testimonials from traditional public health announcements. While government-led initiatives often rely on a top-down dissemination of medical facts, the artifacts analyzed in this study operate within a "mediatized" environment where the boundaries between public service and private entertainment are blurred. This environment allows for the "American hierarchy of values" (specifically the tension between individual liberty and collective responsibility) to be performed in real-time. By utilizing the affordances of platforms like Instagram and X, celebrities do not merely share information; they invite the audience into a digital space where vaccination is framed as a lifestyle choice and a cultural performance of belonging. After analyzing the four case studies, the discussion shifts to the deceptively personal relationship between celebrities and their public audiences.

Central to this synthesis is the role of parasocial interaction, which provides the rhetorical "glue" for the themes identified in Tables 1 and 2. Hartelius and Asenas (2010) contend how "epideictic discourses tell us not only who to be, but how to be" (p. 361). The testimonials reviewed throughout may convey to the audience *how to be* in regards to COVID-19 and vaccinations. This relationship first functioned specifically through the medium of television, which effectively projects celebrities into the casual privacy of viewers' homes, and has only grown with the expansion of social media and networked communication technologies. Though celebrities are out of touch in terms of economic and social advantages, the audience may feel connected based on recognition. Because audiences perceive a one-sided yet intimate bond with the celebrities they follow, the "Relatable Risk" rhetoric used by figures like Handler carries more weight than a generic medical warning. This intimacy transforms the vaccination testimonial from a clinical recommendation into a peer-to-peer suggestion. In this context, the celebrity functions as a cultural mediator, translating complex scientific trust into a digestible, social-media-friendly narrative that prioritizes emotional

resonance over empirical data, thereby leveraging *pathos* to overcome deep-seated vaccine hesitancy.

With the arrival of social media influencer posts and advertisements, audiences are inundated with celebrity rhetoric via posts, tweets, pictures, and more. Social media has allowed the “interactions” to “become more intimate, open, reciprocal, and frequent” because it seems like the celebrities are “revealing their personal lives and thoughts to consumers” (Baines et al., 2017, p. 482). To an audience member, it is as though the audience is glimpsing into the private diary of a celebrity. This contact, though ephemeral, is constant, and the consistency has further broken the perceived barrier between audience and celebrity. The false closeness between an audience member and celebrity can also be characterized as a parasocial relationship. Baines, Chung, and Cho (2017) write about how “parasocial relationships arise when individuals are repeatedly exposed to a media persona, and the individuals develop a sense of intimacy, perceived friendship, and identification with the celebrity” (p. 482). With every post, tweet, and picture, the audience has a deeper glimpse into the life of the celebrity.

These continual posts may foster a sense of communication (*you post a picture, I like it and comment on it*), and may also promote shared cultural values. As Baines, Chung, and Cho discuss, “the interactive conversation with celebrities and the hope of receiving exclusive communication from them excites fans and encourages them to remain dedicated to the celebrities they follow” (p. 482). Even with the negative impact of what Baines describes as a parasocial relationship, there is a positive outcome. When audiences are comfortable with a celebrity and have formed a parasocial relationship, it also brings “brand loyalty and willingness to provide personal information to brands in Web site forms and customer surveys” (Baines et al., 2017, p. 483). Panahi et al. (2016) believe that “with the ubiquitous nature of social media, availability anywhere and anytime, it is very easy to stay connected with peers” (p. 103). In the same way, it is as easy to sustain a connection with celebrities, who also have accounts on social media sites like X, Instagram, and TikTok. They may establish accounts for personal reasons, or to promote a product. Given the easy availability of social media platforms, “Anyone could use social media to share and promote his or her own particular knowledge, experiences, and findings” (Panahi et al., 2016p. 105). In effect, if “anyone” can use social media as a promotion tool, then it may work as an efficient way for celebrities to disseminate various medical testimonials.

The viral phenomenon of shared media ensures that these testimonials reach a saturation point that traditional media cannot replicate. When a non-celebrity like Sandra Lindsay or a satirist from *Saturday Night Live* enters the digital discourse, their rhetoric is amplified by the same algorithms that govern celebrity culture. This creates a feedback loop where "civic duty" is gamified and rewarded through social validation, such as likes, shares, and comments. The rhetorical power here lies in the "re-contextualization" of the vaccine; it is no longer just a pharmaceutical product but a symbol of national resilience and a ticket to returning to the social "normalcy" celebrated in American popular culture. Ultimately, this analysis reveals that the effectiveness of celebrity vaccination rhetoric is less about the medical accuracy of the claims and more about the "ethos" of the speaker within the U.S. cultural landscape. Whether through the formal, patriotic framing of a televised dose or the informal, humorous dismissal of side effects, these testimonials reinforce a specific American value system.

In the case of mediated celebrity inoculation against COVID-19, messaging is a narrative construct complicated by notions of celebrity. As Erin Myers (2009) argued in the *Journal of Popular Culture*:

The illusion of intimacy and the pursuit of truth that characterize the negotiation of the celebrity image are central to the ideological power of the celebrity sign. The audience negotiates the image using notions of authenticity and truth to decipher the 'real' celebrity. This is not a simple process, but one fraught with complexity and contradiction.... Although we can never really know the truth about a celebrity, as it is a mediated and highly constructed position, the pursuit of that truth allows audiences to organize and understand themselves and the world around them. (p. 905)

When social media posts receive notice, with more attention may come more validation. Pietro Ghezzi et al. (2019) discuss how certain users, or users they deem as having low e-health literacy, then "determine trust based on the bandwagon heuristic and assume that, if the source has already been deemed valid by others, then it is safe for them to trust it too" (p. 3). This reiterates the importance of media literacy education, which can equip users with the skills to critically evaluate information encountered online.

Instead of trusting a traditional medical website, well-liked media posts enter a loop where they are shared, deemed trustworthy based on past shares (number of likes), and then shared by new users (thus becoming

further validated). Ghezzi et al. (2019) states that traditional medical websites lack "alternative means of determining credibility and trust" for low eHealth literate users (p. 3). This phenomenon of sharing media posts and trusting them for their wide likability would not be possible without search engines and social media companies. Ghezzi et al. (2019) believes when these companies store user information (to include private health information if shared), they are "combining it with additional information collected for tracking purposes, and using these data for commercial or other purposes" (p. 4). Therefore, the real and more toxic loop may stem from the sharing of user information for economic gain by social media and internet companies.

Conclusion

Overall, this research was concerned with understanding the rhetorical function of celebrity testimonials and COVID-19 vaccinations in contemporary American culture. More specifically, this was an analysis on how celebrity testimonials may collectivize responsibilities over public health regarding COVID-19 vaccines. Future studies may better gauge how the role of celebrities in public health influences the perception of vaccines in the media. Across the U.S., COVID-19 vaccinations lack a widely circulated (or widely recognizable) media ad. Arguably, informal celebrity rhetoric has filled this gap. Social media and news coverage of celebrity COVID vaccinations function by referencing public values such as community responsibility and the value of health itself. In the context of these testimonials, celebrities influence the American public with regard to COVID vaccine safety, effectiveness, and comfort. In the increasingly complex negotiations of science, safety, and risk following the COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative for the viewing public to understand the function of celebrity rhetoric as a source and reflection of values.

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