

#WearADamnMask Can Teach Health Officials A Lot About Influencing the Public's Behavior During a Pandemic

DEK: UCF student Bonnie Cross will share her research findings regarding the politicization of COVID's health care advisories during the Student Scholar Symposium, part of UCF's Annual Student Research Week celebration.

ORLANDO, March 31, 2021 – The Centers for Diseases Control and Prevention (CDC) public directive to wear face masks during the COVID-19 pandemic turned political pretty quickly, which intrigued one UCF scholar.

For Bonnie Cross, a doctoral student in the Texts and Technology program, the politicization of the health advisory through #WearADamnMask was too big to ignore. That's why she made it the focus of her research, which she will share during the Student Scholar Symposium, which is part of UCF's annual Research Week, March 29-April 2.

"I was interested in what factors influence the public in regard to public health and safety," Cross says. "As many scientific bodies and health officials turn to social media to gain a broader audience, I was curious how social media influences their messages."

#WearADamnMask went viral on social media, which is where Cross found rich data to mine. She analyzed Tweets using the hashtag at the beginning of the pandemic and frequently used words associated with the hashtag. Then she compared it to the hashtag and frequently used words during key political moments of the past year: the first Presidential debate, when former President Donald Trump was diagnosed with COVID-19, and during the Presidential election.

"I found that President Biden and Vice President Harris, along with the Black Lives Matter movement, were connected to the hashtag and had a positive sentiment compared to negative sentiment towards President Trump," she says. "While the CDC and Dr. (Anthony) Fauci were occasionally mentioned, political references were more frequent compared to any references towards medical bodies or professionals, suggesting that these political figures held more weight."

Language matters and so does the messenger, she said.

"It is critical that medical bodies and health officials recognize that there are multiple factors beyond the science that influence the public's decisions regarding health," she says.

"Understanding the public's concerns and hesitations is the first step towards outreach and building trust."

To find out more about Cross' work and that of other undergraduate and graduate students, check out the Student Scholar Symposium during this year's virtual Student Research Week. Hundreds of students will be presenting their work. Those with a valid UCF email are welcome to attend virtually. For details and schedule of all events [click here](#).

