

‘Taming toxins’. Exploring the Intersection between Science and Pseudo-Science in the Online Discourse about ‘Detox’

In conventional medicine, the term ‘detox’ refers to a medical procedure addressed to people with life-threatening drug addictions; however, the term has been hijacked by alternative medicine to sell treatments that allegedly rid our bodies of all sorts of toxins (Harvard Health, 2008). This paper looks at the intersection between scientific and pseudo-scientific narratives in the online discourse about ‘detox’, examining how and to what extent these coexist on the Web. Specifically, it explores the discursive strategies used to either validate or refute alternative detox treatments, drawing on previous studies on Internet health scams (Garrett et al., 2019a; 2019b). To do so, corpus assisted discourse analysis is applied to a corpus of texts on detox randomly collected on the Web via Sketch Engine. Preliminary findings show that corrective messages, aimed at debunking the myth of detox, account for less than 10% of the texts collected in the corpus. Furthermore, the meaning of many keywords identified in the corpus is subject to constant renegotiation and redefinition on the part of writers: for instance, the term ‘toxin/s’ is used by proponents of alternative medicine to justify the need for detox treatments, while is criticised by scientists as ‘non-existent’ and ‘classic pseudo-science terminology’ (Carroll, 2014). The study suggests that terminological ambiguity allows communicators advocating alternative detox treatments to manipulate the message and intentionally mix scientific and pseudo-scientific content, with the effect of disorienting readers and making it difficult for them to understand the real purpose of communication.

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