

“I should know because I have struggled with this illness for ten years.” Raising and challenging claims to knowledge and expertise in online health fora. A corpus study

An important part of online communication consists of interaction between individuals who do not know about each others' social backgrounds. As participants in such communication often do not claim professional expertise, acquired through formal education and professional practice, lay expertise, acquired through informal education (self-study) and everyday experience (sufferer, participant, etc.), assumes a more prominent role. Lay expertise is usually not a given in such scenarios, but must be explicitly invoked as part of claims to specific knowledge, though both expertise and knowledge can also be challenged, i.e. questioned or contradicted. All of these can lead to an extended process of negotiations of claims to (lay) expertise and claims to knowledge.

While such negotiations are not significant in all online communication, they are consequential if the topic of the interaction is concerned with technology, the law, and especially health, where specific information can be the foundation of advice adopted by participants.

This study will look at how such claims to lay expertise and knowledge and challenges to them are realized linguistically and rhetorically in health forums and also at what this can reveal about the status of expertise and knowledge in online interaction. It will methodologically draw corpus-based discourse analysis (cf. Baker 2006, Mautner 2009) and corpus pragmatics (cf. Rühlemann 2019) as well as conversation analysis (cf. Clift 2016), with a special emphasis on the analysis of epistemics (cf. Heritage & Raymond 2005).

The study will use a corpus of postings to health fora on four types of conditions, viz. multiple sclerosis, headaches and migraines, cardiovascular diseases, and depression. The size of the corpus is 2.3 million word tokens, with 16,400 postings to 2,400 threads.

References

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