

How to be an expert online? A corpus-based study of expert identity construction on a Spanish medical forum

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The use of online communication tool is rapidly increasing in the medical sector, in spite of parts of society and of the medical profession being rather wary as to this evolution. In this paper, we want to contribute to this field by showing how the status of 'expert' is constructed in a corpus of interactions of a Spanish medical online forum. The forum under scrutiny contains both threads where only laypersons contribute and threads which are moderated by an actively participating qualified healthcare professional (doctors, nurses, dieticians,...). In our study, we wish to focus on how the identity as an 'expert' is constructed by those asking questions and answering them. We will compare the case of healthcare professionals as experts with the case of non-qualified laypersons who have a certain expertise (e.g. because they have a long experience as patient of a certain illness) and, as such, (try to) intervene as an expert in the forum.

In order to do so, we will carry out a corpus analysis focusing on explicit references to the fact of being an expert (e.g. mentions of the profession or title) as well as on other ways of constructing expert status (e.g. references to experience). Second, we will look into the strategies used by both professionals and laypersons to legitimize knowledge as expert knowledge (e.g. reference to a scientific source). Finally, we will compare the strategies put in place in the discourse by and towards the qualified healthcare professionals vs. those in the discourse by and towards the non-qualified laypersons, in order to shed light on whether the expert status of these two groups of participants is discursively constructed in a similar way or not.