

Identity performance in online health columns: The linguistic construction of the expert persona

Abstract:

In the last decade health educators have recognized the potential of Internet-based resources for the provision of health information. This paper explores one UK and one US Internet-based, professional advice column on health issues dedicated to young adults, focusing in particular upon the linguistic identity construction of the advice-givers. We maintain that the development of a particular voice is an important factor in making the site attractive for young adults as well as making a contribution to the dissemination of health care knowledge. Other factors that render an advice column advantageous are the continually developing archive of previous letter exchanges that are at the users' disposal and the anonymity granted to the advice-seekers by the computer-mediated platform. The latter point is important because significant barriers exist in face-to-face communication on taboo issues between health professionals and young adults, resulting in silence or at best minimal contributions due to feelings of marginalization, embarrassment or fear of confidentiality breaches (Jacobson et al. 2001; McPherson 2005). The decision to offer advice via the medium of a column adds a personal dimension to the responses, while still being tailored for a mass audience. Our analysis will characterize the linguistic strategies that contribute to the identity performance and construction of voice of the two advice-giving female personas, such as the balance between formal and informal language, the quoting of sources as warranting strategies to claim/defend expertise and linguistic manifestations of humour and empathy.

References

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