

Chapter 6

Adopting a Parasocial Connection to Overcome Professional Kakoethos in Online Health Information

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ABSTRACT

This chapter approaches online ethos rhetorically to argue that professional medical sources (e.g., practitioners, organizations) must overcome a rhetorically constituted kakoethos in order to influence online health information seekers. Professional medical source kakoethos is established through a lack of identified, authentic personal experience with specific medical conditions, and health information message content that focuses exclusively on the science behind the condition. Conversely, lay health information sources fashion ethos through identifying personal experience with specific medical conditions, and employing emotionally supportive messages. The result is an online health rhetoric appearing credible and authentic. Rhetorically crafting a parasocial connection to online health information seekers may offer a means for professional medical sources to overcome the kakoethos established through lack of personal experience.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet has changed how individuals interact with health information. Online health information seekers can easily find themselves overwhelmed with health messages from a vast number of potential sources. For better or for worse, the massive amount—and instantaneous availability—of health information available online can provide individuals with a swift avenue to self-diagnose. Findings from the Pew Research Center (Fox & Duggan, 2013) suggested that approximately three-fourths of Internet users

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search for health information online. Over half of those users reported searching for health information to assist in determining a medical diagnosis, either for themselves or for a close other, such as a friend or family member.

Whether accessing symptom checkers to make a self-diagnosis, considering the health advice embedded within friends' posts on social media, or reading emotionally supportive posts on online support discussion boards, individuals are bombarded by health messages online. The wide array of online health information sources problematizes traditional notions of expertise and credibility when it comes to health information and advice messages. In order to increase influence on online health information seekers, professional medical sources (e.g., practitioners, organizations) must overcome the *kakoethos* or "anti-ethos" (Johnson, 2010) constructed in professional medical online health information. *Kakoethos* can be fashioned through a lack of authentic, personal experience with the particular medical condition, as well as a rhetoric that focuses exclusively on the science behind a medical condition without including any elements of emotional support. Creating a parasocial connection between professional medical sources and online health information seekers may offer a means to overcome the *kakoethos* constructed in much online health information provided by professional medical sources.

This chapter differentiates how *ethos* and *kakoethos* are crafted and maintained in the rhetoric of online health information. Analyses of lay and professional medical online health information concerning Multiple Sclerosis (MS) are presented to provide further insight into how *ethos* and *kakoethos* are rhetorically constituted in online health information. As a multitude of information on the condition from both lay and professional sources is available online, MS serves as an appropriate topic in which to rhetorically examine online health information. Using previous rhetorical and social science research, as well as the MS examples analyzed within, the chapter contends that a rhetorically grounded parasocial connection may offer professional medical sources a way to counteract the *kakoethos* constructed in their rhetoric. Through examples of medical health professional websites, as well as lay health information sources, this chapter offers case studies about how *kakoethos* can be overcome through personalized rhetoric. Similarly, this chapter diagnoses that an ill of many professional online health information sites is rhetoric that lacks personal experience with specific conditions. Offering this kind of personalized rhetoric alongside professional medical advice can help practitioners build a sense of shared identity, which can enhance their general *ethos* or credibility.

BACKGROUND

A conception of *ethos* as credibility is challenged by the (seemingly) anonymous online environment. Frobish (2013) suggested that classic notions of *ethos* may no longer apply to the online environment because *digital ethos* suggests that the notion of credibility may be "freed," or more fluid, in the online environment. However, this chapter contends that Aristotle's (2007) artistic and inartistic proofs can still aid in conceptualizing and understanding *ethos* in online health information messages. Artistic proofs concern the dimensions discursively constructed in a text. Conversely, inartistic proofs address elements extrinsic to the text itself. In order to understand credibility in the online environment, the intrinsic (i.e., that which is available to an audience discursively within a text) must be distinguished from the extrinsic (i.e., that which is the subject position of the text's author). More specifically, as such expertise solely represents inartistic proof, a traditional medical credibility arising from expert power (see French & Raven, 1959), when divorced from the professional setting of a physical medical space (i.e., a doctor's office), may not necessarily have the same influence to persuade online health information seekers.

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