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## **STABLE SCIENCE AND FICKLE BODIES: AN EXAMINATION OF TRUST AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF EXPERTISE ON R/SKINCAREADDICTION**

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### **Introduction**

While there is considerable research on the topic of trust when it comes to health information or news media, there is less work examining how trust and expertise are conceptualized for information that may straddle both subjective and objective approaches to knowledge. In this paper, I use the subreddit *r/SkincareAddiction* as a fieldsite to examine how users construct skincare expertise and position skincare expertise in relation to formalized bioscience and experiential knowledge. Building on Science and Technology Studies' theories of lay expertise and embodiment, I investigate how users interpret, share, and enact skincare and subreddit competence, discern trustworthy information, and negotiate the boundaries of science. Specifically, this research asks the following questions: (1) How do users of *r/SkincareAddiction* discuss trust, and what factors contribute to or detract from the creation of trustworthiness? (2) How do users of *r/SkincareAddiction* evaluate skincare expertise? (2a) What are the ways users of *r/SkincareAddiction* perform skincare expertise? (3) How do users of *r/SkincareAddiction* view the body as it relates to skincare?

Through a grounded theory analysis of subreddit posts and comments, I argue that *r/SkincareAddiction* users engage in forms of boundary work to preserve the expertise of medical professionals and the perceived infallibility of science. I argue that such delineations both uphold formalized systems of expertise and make space for alternative, community-specific forms of skincare expertise. This community-specific expertise is reified through community norms and agreed upon beliefs, such as the understanding that “your mileage may vary” and “everyone’s skin is different”. I situate these community beliefs within feminist understandings of embodied knowledge and argue that these beliefs are what afford users participation in “expert” conversations from which they might otherwise be excluded.

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## Theoretical Frameworks

This research is situated within a larger body of literature in Science and Technology Studies (STS) that investigates how expertise is defined and bounded in scientific and non-scientific domains. That primary theoretical framework used in this research is STS and feminist STS understandings of expertise, with specific focus paid to the tensions between lay and embodied expertise and “type 1” expertise (Haraway, 1988; Collins & Evans, 2002). The theory of lay expertise (Epstein, 1995; Bryan Wynne, 1996) is essential to unpacking r/SkincareAddiction because it helps illuminate the central tension present in this research— how do people determine expertise in a lay community, when the topic of that expertise (skincare) is ill-defined and distributed across both scientific and non-scientific domains?

Drawing from the work of scholars such as H.M. Collins and Robert Evans (2002), Bryan Wynne (1996), and Steven Epstein (1995), I examine how lay expertise can be used as a framework to analyze skincare authority within the subreddit r/SkincareAddiction. In addition, I utilize the feminist theories of embodiment and self-knowledge to examine the corporeal and embedded aspects of skincare expertise (Barad, 1999; Suchman, 2007; Haraway, 1988; Mol, 2002).

Expertise provides a valuable lens from which to analyze r/SkincareAddiction due to the unique nature of skincare and the function of the subreddit format. Like other special interest subreddits, r/SkincareAddiction’s breadth and depth help create a repository of collective knowledge that users can consult for relevant or helpful information. The subreddit features the perspectives and advice of a mix of users- the majority of whom are skincare hobbyists, while others are dermatologists, cosmetic chemists, estheticians, and those with professions related to skincare. As a result, the advice offered and its respective rationale can differ, and users are left to determine which information they trust and deem credible, as well as whose expertise they value.

## Methods

This study employs aspects of grounded theory to analyze posts and comments on r/SkincareAddiction. The sample size of posts was first limited to those that had a keyword appearance of “trust” in the title or text of the post. The purpose of this exclusion criteria was to confine the data set and increase the chances of yielding discussions that engaged more explicitly with notions of credibility, expertise, and authority. These posts were then sorted by the categorical tag that the subreddit assigns to each post (also known as “flair.”) This was accomplished by using the search query “flair: [flair name] AND trust”.

The keyword and flair search results were then filtered using the “top” and “all time” facets to show the posts with the highest vote counts (solutionengineering, 2021). The top ten posts and all associated comments of each category were then screen shot using a full page screen capture application. The screen captures were then imported into Atlas.ti. In total there were 501 quotations (text that received coding) spanning 14 different flair groups.

Codes were developed using an inductive and iterative coding process adopted from the grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014). The first round of coding helped develop both thematic codes (“dermatology”) as well as process codes (“stating my experience”). The data then underwent two more rounds of coding resulting in a codebook of 59 codes.

Limitations to this study included: use of a single coder, use of a single keyword for inclusion criteria, possible decontextualization during the coding process, and a possible bias towards newer posts.

## **Findings**

There were three major themes that emerged from this research: (1) dermatology and medical/scientific credibility (2) trust and skincare (3) specificity and the role of personal responsibility in skincare.

Overall, users found dermatologists to be credible due their extensive training, unique medical knowledge, and participation in the medical system. The expertise of dermatologists was frequently contrasted to that of the users’ of the subreddit as a way to demonstrate the dermatologists’ intellectual authority. Dermatologists were also characterized as practitioners of science who were not influenced by profit. Interestingly, some users did not see dermatologists as authorities on skincare *because* they were doctors.

Users most explicitly invoked trust when discussing skincare products. Certain factors signaled the trustworthiness of a product, such as the brand, ingredients, proximity to science, or European origin. The greatest factor associated with distrust was monetization. Other themes that signaled distrust were cheating or inadequate regulations, absence of science, big box online retailers, or inadequate ingredients. Some users also expressed distrust in the Skincare Addiction community. The most complex and overt conversations about trust had to do with trusting sunscreen.

One final theme to emerge was the idea of self-knowledge or self-expertise. Users encouraged people to trust their gut, listen to their body, and understand that skincare is extremely personal. Relatedly, many users discussed the role and effort required to achieve good skin and engage in the practice of skincare. This involved doing their research, fixing their skin on their own, being a critical consumer, and understanding that their mileage will always vary.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this study contribute to the larger body of work around the construction of expertise and the use of science to bolster or undermine that expertise in lay communities. The subreddit r/SkincareAddiction provides a unique context in which to analyze expertise due to the subreddit’s fluid understanding of what constitutes skincare and whether it belongs in the domain of bioscience or that of personal experience and aesthetic preference.

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