# 12  Exploring Everyday Ethos
## Ethos Techniques in Online Discussions about Extraordinary Experiences

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## 12.1  Introduction: Bianca's story[1]

One Saturday night in May 2004, Bianca, a Dutch teenager, had a frightening experience at a dance party. Although she had had no drinks beyond the usual ("five Vodka Red Bull cocktails"),[2] she suddenly started to shake all over, her vision blurred and her heart raced. She suspected that someone had drugged her drink, but she could not be sure. Sharing her worries with the crowd at Partyflock, a thriving Dutch Internet community for dance party enthusiasts, she ends her first message: "Does anyone know what could have caused this?"

Bianca knew in advance that she would meet with both sympathy and a fair amount of skepticism, since drink spiking is a controversial issue among Dutch adolescents: some are convinced that it is a genuine crime problem, others that it is a combination of urban legend and hysteria (Hulsebosch et al. 2008). Bianca's audience was not present at the party, so they have to take her words on faith – as do we. In order to elicit sympathy, Bianca has to convince others that she is a reasonable, likeable person, and a trustworthy witness to that night's events. To pre-empt the argument that she must have been drunk, she volunteers information about her alcohol intake, which does not exceed the limits deemed acceptable among Partyflock visitors. She also states her suspicions with caution: "I'm certainly not the one to jump to the conclusion that drugs were slipped into my drink, but I was just sooo scared." In rhetorical terms, Bianca has to establish ethos to convince her audience that something extraordinary has happened to her.

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[1] Thanks to Jaap de Jong for his contribution to this chapter.

[2] All translations from the Dutch are by the authors.

Like Bianca, millions of people use the Internet to share experiences and debate all sorts of issues. Whether or not this constitutes an extension of the public sphere (Habermas 1989) is itself a matter of debate (Dahlberg 2001; Pappacharissi 2002; Warnick 2007, pp. 1-23; Witschge 2007). Some have welcomed newsgroups, blogs and web-based discussion boards as new public arenas, offering universal access and a more level playing field, others doubt the Internet's democratic potential and possibilities for deliberative discourse.

Perhaps topic starters like Bianca are not looking for debate. The very first thing they crave for is a reply. Getting a reply, let alone generate a discussion is quite an achievement in itself: in a study of 40,931 messages in 99 Usenet newsgroups it was found that 43 percent of the topic starters never received a reply; similar percentages were found in other studies (Burke et al. 2007). Using introductions and making requests raised the likelihood of receiving replies. This in turn has important group cohesion effects: posters who received a reply, particularly if they were newbies, were more likely to post again (Burke et al. 2007).

Although Burke et al. label these introductions and requests as *rhetorical* strategies, they eschew the framework of classical rhetoric. This is symptomatic for the study of online rhetoric: although this topic has come in for some scholarly attention (Enos and Borrowman 2001; Warnick 2007), the rhetoricians in this field are few and far between. However, given the prominence of the online world as an arena for public rhetoric, and, as we will argue, the abundance and ready availability of excellent research materials it offers, this promising topic is well worth the consideration of rhetoricians.

The present study explores the use of ethos in online discussions. To justify our focus on ethos, we might call to mind Aristotle's view that this is the most persuasive of the three modes of persuasion (Aristotle 1974, pp. 100-101; Braet 2007, p. 50). Hence our research questions: What model can be used to study the ethos aspects of online discussions? What ethos techniques are used in the present sample of online discussions about drink spiking? And finally, do ethos techniques described in the classical literature possess real life – or rather, virtual life – validity?

## 12.2 Drink spiking as crime legend

Discussions about drink spiking among Dutch adolescents offer a convenient point of entry into the study of online ethos. Drink spiking and drug rape emerged during the 1990s as an international crime problem. In bars and at dance parties, young women are allegedly drugged and subsequently abused. The so-called

rape drugs or date rape drugs mentioned most frequently are GHB and Rohypnol (or "roofies"). In spite of widespread concerns among adolescents and dire warnings by prevention agencies and police forces, however, forensic experts and a number of police officials remain unconvinced (Beynon et al. 2008; Burgess, Donovan and Moore 2009). The alleged effects of rape drugs, they claim, are merely the mistaken symptoms of unacknowledged alcohol abuse. This controversy also exists at the popular level of blogs and digital discussion boards.
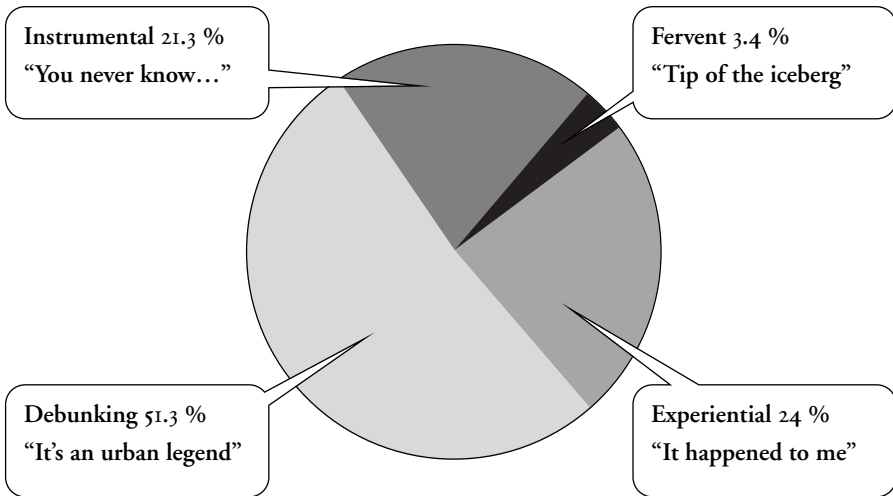
The present study is part of a larger research project concerning the social construction of new crimes in various media and the relations between crime news and folklore (e.g., Burger 2009). Why folklore? Folklore is the realm of unofficial knowledge and informal stories. Stories and discussions about instances of drink spiking can be studied as belonging to the genre of legend. Traditionally viewed as narratives about man meeting the Other World, e.g., ghosts, vampires and aliens, in the opinion of a number of scholars (e.g., Best and Horiuchi 1984; Best and Hutchinson 1996; Donovan 2002) legend also encompasses stories about ordinary people meeting the Underworld.

In these crime legends, ordinary persons experience the extraordinary in the shape of organ thieves, hook-handed maniacs, or drug rapists. These narratives may be told as personal experience stories or as second-hand or third-hand tales, attributed to the proverbial 'friend of a friend', hence 'FOAF tales' (Dale 1978). Legends are truth claims in narrative form, which typically engender debate. As such, these legends provide ample opportunity for studying ethos in action.

The online sample used in this study was assembled for a previous study of *logos* in drink spiking discussions that sought to answer the question what arguments discussion participants used to argue their belief, disbelief or partial belief in the threat of drink spiking (Hulsebosch et al. 2008). A threefold typology of crime legend belief and disbelief was used (Donovan 2002, 2004), that distinguishes between debunking ("It's a hoax / an urban legend / a case of hysteria"), fervent belief ("It's true! This is just the tip the iceberg!") and so-called instrumental or conditional belief ("Given the state of the world, it *could* be true, and even if it isn't, one can never be too careful"). From the quantitative content analysis of frequently used arguments, a fourth type emerged: experiential belief ("I know it's true, because it happened to me").

A breakdown of the arguments into the broad categories of those for and those against belief in the reality of drink spiking allegations, shows a neat, almost even distribution (figure 12.1). A closer look at the arguments on the

FIGURE 12.1 ARGUMENTS (N=503) USED IN ONLINE DISCUSSIONS ABOUT DRINK SPIKING (54 THREADS)

Instrumental 21.3 %
"You never know…"

Fervent 3.4 %
"Tip of the iceberg"

Debunking 51.3 %
"It's an urban legend"

Experiential 24 %
"It happened to me"

believing side shows them to be an uneven mix, in which those expressing fervent belief were negligible, whereas those expressing instrumental and experiential belief accounted for the majority of arguments.

From the study of *logos* in drink spiking discussions we can deduce that Bianca, and other believers, could expect strong opposition to their claims of having been spiked. Before we can answer the question how they established ethos, and how their adversaries tried to bolster their own ethos as they were trying to undermine the believers' ethos, we turn to the insights of the scholars who tilled this field before us.

## 12.3 Studying ethos: Aristotle and beyond

In order to study the ethos techniques used in the discussions under consideration, we did not have to start from scratch. Both classical authors and contemporary academic literature offer a number of perspectives on the study of ethos. Our main sources of inspiration were Aristotle's rhetoric (2004) and the 'rhetoric of truth' model devised by folklorist Elliott Oring (2008), but we also drew on discursive psychology and social-psychological research into computer-mediated communication.

The terms used in these disciplines are not exact matches. The Aristotelian notion of *ethos* overlaps social psychology's *source credibility* (McCroskey 2001,

pp. 83-85; McCroskey and Young 1981). Then again, Potter's discursive psychology offers terms like *entitlement* (Potter 1996, Ch. 5). Since the more recent psychological approaches address parts of the rhetorical whole, which is covered in its completeness by the Aristotelian model, we will stick to the classical terminology.

In the following overview, techniques that we incorporated in our integrated ethos model (see section 12.4) are tagged with bracketed numbers.

### 12.3.1  The Aristotelian tradition

According to Aristotle, a speaker's ethos is construed by the audience as it listens to his speech (Johnson 1996, p. 243). The audience judges three dimensions: the orator's φρόνησις (*phronesis*: expertise, knowledge), his ἀρέτη (*arete*: virtue), and his ευνοία (*eunoia*: goodwill) (Aristotle 2004, p. 101)[3].

An orator displays *expertise* by demonstrating an understanding of the topic at hand, and insight into the issues it raises, e.g., by offering details and numbers. Another way of showing expertise is by referring to one's experience and education (Braet 2007, p. 51) (4).

Orators make a *virtuous* impression when they appear to speak the truth. One way of achieving this is by simply claiming to be a truthful person (9). Another, more roundabout way of reaching the same goal is by disclosing information that could be harmful to one's ethos, e.g., by admitting ignorance or minor sins (8).

Orators are judged to be persons of *good will* when they appear to share the characteristics of their audience. One can search for common ground by emphasizing personal or issue characteristics (10). One's political affiliation or religious orientation may be an ethos booster, as can be the choice of issue, e.g., addressing environmental aspects when discussing the proposed expansion of an airport will be more likely to win the sympathy of a left-leaning audience than addressing economic interests (Braet 2007, p. 52). Other techniques that establish goodwill are vilifying common enemies (12): doing this enhances the speaker's own ethos (Andeweg and De Jong 2004, p. 54), and praising and thanking the audience (*ibid*. p. 55) (11).

Although the classical tradition remains of paramount importance for the present-day study of rhetoric, the Aristotelian model was tailored to the

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[3] The literature offers various translations. McCroskey and Young (1981, p. 24) summarize Aristotle's dimensions as "intelligence, character, and good will".

analysis of public monologues on matters juridical, political or ceremonial, which is a far cry from the free-for-all polylogues on discussion boards like Partyflock.nl. In order to study these informal discussions, however, we can draw on three further research traditions, those of computer-mediated communication (CMC) studies, discursive psychology and folklore studies.

### 12.3.2 Computer-mediated communication studies: Burke et al. (2007)

Burke et al. (2007) identified two successful rhetorical strategies for topic starters: introductions referencing lurking ("I have been reading here a while and want-ed to ask") or a personal connection to the topic ("I was recently diagnosed with Epilepsy", in alt.support.epilepsy); and questions and requests ("What can I expect from chemotherapy?"; "Wondering the best way to dissolve choco-late, besides eating it."). We focus on the introductions, in which topic starters search for common ground by emphasizing personal or issue characteristics (10). Requests, although they are rhetorical strategies, are indirectly related to the poster's ethos. As such, they need not concern us here.

The introductions clearly relate to the Aristotelian dimensions of ethos: "Including a self-disclosing introduction demonstrates legitimacy and com-mitment to the group […]" (Burke et al. 2007, p. 16) Introducing yourself as a former lurker means disclosing information that could be mildly harmful to one's ethos (8): "I'm not one of the regulars, until now I have not made any contribution to the community." In effect, this strategy turns out to be benef-icent: instead of being chastised for previous freeloading behavior, the poster is rewarded with a reply. Topic introductions establish common ground: the newbie shares the disease, music taste or cultural background of the community.

Although the number of techniques analyzed by Burke et al. (*ibid.*) is limited, the paper stands out for its strong empirical and experimental design. Correlation between these techniques and the number of replies was estab-lished by automatic content analysis of a Usenet sample consisting of almost 41,000 messages. The extent to which the response rate was *caused* by these techniques was investigated by tweaking and reposting a number of messages, systematically varying the presence of introductions and requests.

Group introductions ("I've been lurking here a while") double the num-ber of replies. Topic introductions ("I was diagnosed with Epilepsy") did not have a significant effect, however. Requests did increase the number of replies, but their effect was less pronounced than that of the group introductions.

### 12.3.3 Discursive psychology

Discursive psychology is part of the wider field of inquiry of discursive constructionism (Potter and Hepburn 2008). Its aim is the analysis of the discursive practices that are used to construct facts in various kinds of discourse. Building on ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, discursive psychologists have analyzed marriage counseling sessions, informal conversations between television documentary makers, talk show interviews and other forms of discourse to study the way talk constructs social reality (Potter 1996). Particularly relevant to our drink spiking case is Wooffitt's (1992) study of accounts of the paranormal. Wooffitt shows how speakers construct their extraordinary experiences as real by employing discursive practices a rhetorician would recognize as ethos techniques.

From this literature, we considered five techniques as potentially relevant for our model.

#### A. Present oneself as an ordinary person

The person relating the extraordinary experience may volunteer information as to his condition at the time: e.g., sitting upright in bed, wide awake and consequently fully conscious of what went on around him (Wooffitt 1992, p. 152). To stress one's rationality, one may report a reality check (1), testing the extraordinary explanation, e.g.: "When I thought I heard the voice of my deceased mother, I first made sure that the radio was off, to exclude that as an explanation" (Wooffitt 1992, p. 83). To show that they possess their critical faculties, people may also correct themselves (Wooffitt 1992, p. 110):

> H:    John, you told me about an experience that happened to you,
>        repeatedly I take it, as a child. Would you give the details?
> J:    It wasn't exactly as a child.
>        I was a teenager at the time, you know.
>        Well, fifteen, sixteen years of age.

In this example, John does not want to label his younger self as a 'child', rather than a teenager or better still, a fifteen or sixteen year old, meaning that he was old enough to understand the experience correctly.

#### B. Stressing the ordinariness of the situation

A technique frequently employed is describing the situation just before the extraordinary event took place: "I was just doing X, when Y" (Wooffitt 1992, p.

118). Typically, 'X' is a mundane activity like doing the dishes; its very every-day quality means that what follows ("when I heard a voice in my head") could happen to anybody. Since this technique pertains to logos rather than ethos, we did not incorporate it in our model.

### C. Referring to authorities or other witnesses

Appeals to authority (2) may make a story appear more credible. One may re-fer to others who concur that somebody really had an extraordinary experi-ence or was acting or looking different. This is someone talking about a girl who was found to be mentally ill:

> […] I was actually the last of her close friends who was openly willing to admit that she was becoming mentally ill.

The person talking enlists the opinion of other 'close friends' to shore up her own conclusion that the girl was becoming mentally ill. This objectivates the extraordinary (Potter 1996, pp. 127-128; Wooffitt 1992, p. 101). Speakers may also try to construct the phenomenon as a generally acknowledged one by point-ing out others who have experienced it and who have expressed belief in it. One way of doing this is by quoting those people:

> She says
> "Did you feel something?"
> "*Damn right* I felt something!"
> I said,
> "There's a ghost up there."
> She says,
> "Yeah, we know.
> We didn't want to tell you
> because we didn't want to
> unnecessarily frighten you." (Wooffitt 1992, pp. 169-170)

In this example a third party vouches for the correctness of the extraordinary experience.

## D. Footing

The experience under discussion may be one's own, a second-hand account or it may be even further removed from the speaker. Potter dubs this speaker-source relationship *footing*, a term coined by Goffman: "the range of relationships that speakers and writers have to the descriptions they report" (Potter 1996, p. 122). We will use the term distancing (5, 6, 7), developed by Oring (2008) as an addition to the classical ethos devices (see below).

Since we are dealing with legends or urban myths, often characterized as 'friend-of-a-friend stories' or 'FOAF tales' (Dale 1978), it is worth repeating Potter's analysis of this formula (1996, pp. 134-135). 'Friend', Potter observes, serves as an epistemic term, a warrant for factuality: "a friend told me" sounds more credible than "somebody told me". The 'friend of a friend' formula partakes of the epistemic authority of 'a friend', but avoids the danger of claiming a close relationship with the protagonist of an extraordinary event. Potter:

> The 'friend of a friend' construction, then, provides some category entitlement but, at the same time, means the teller is not accountable for gaps, questions and issues with respect to the story: it was just what they heard. What it provides is a trade-off between factuality and deniability. (1996, p. 135)

## E. Reluctance

A final ethos technique from the discursive psychology literature worth mentioning is the avowal of prior disbelief or skepticism: "I used to think that x was utter nonsense, but a recent experience has convinced me that it is, after all, for real." (Lamont 2007, Potter 1996, pp. 125-126, Wooffitt 1992, pp. 78-79). Conversely, skeptics may try to bolster their ethos by claiming that they were initially believers. In Potter's terms, this ploy belongs to the category of *stake inoculation*: the speaker pre-empts the counter-argument that he is merely holding a certain position because he has a stake in the argument. Since the initial qualitative analysis of the drink spiking discussions did not yield instances of this particular technique, however, it was not incorporated in our model.

Summing up: the discursive psychology literature offers a number of concepts and techniques that are relevant to our study of ethos in online discussions. The above examples show that storytellers tend to be prepared for attacks on their ethos. This literature also contains discussions of subjects pertinent to our inquiry into crime legends. Methodologically, these authors favor qualitative content analysis: the techniques they distinguish are based on

the micro-analysis of spoken dialogues and other forms of discourse; they do not attempt to assess their frequency or test their effect. Neither have these concepts been applied to online discussions.

### 12.3.4  Folklore studies

Although folklore scholars have been studying folktales since the early nineteenth century, efforts to apply the framework of rhetoric to the telling of folktales are scarce indeed. Rhetoric features in a number of studies (e.g., Bennett 1988, 1989, 1999; Correll 2005; Hill and Irvine 1993), but the first full-scale attempt to apply the Aristotelian framework to legend studies is a recent paper by Elliott Oring (2008). Oring's model covers all three modes of persuasion: logos, pathos and ethos. In the ethos category, it distinguishes four *topoi*[4]: the authority of the source, risk to the narrator, distancing and judgment.

### A. The authority of the source

"The authority of a source depends, to some extent, upon the social position of the narrator and/or the reputed source of the narrative" (Oring 2008, p. 131). Using Aristotle's distinction, this status can be entechnic or atechnic, i.e., embodied in the discourse or known beforehand. Narrators may construct their authority within the narrative, and besides they may be known as, say, a physician, an adventurer or, for that matter, the village fool. Since our study focuses on the construction of ethos in discourse, we will leave the atechnic part aside.

### B. Risk to the narrator

Disclosing information that could be harmful to one's ethos (8) features in Oring's model as 'risk to the narrator': "The more risk a narrator takes in telling a tale, the more likely a story would be perceived as true" (2008, p.133). A physician telling a ghost story risks his reputation as a man of science, but this, paradoxically, lends plausibility to his narrative.

### C. Distancing

Oring uses the term *distancing* (2008, pp. 133-135) to describe the relationship between the teller and the alleged source of the narrative (cf. Potter's concept of *footing*). Following Georgina Smith (1981, p. 169), he discerns three degrees of separation:

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[4] Oring applies the term tropes here, which many scholars will interpret as a form of 'figurative language'.

1) 'Incorporated', i.e., first-hand, personal experience stories;

2) 'Semi-incorporated', i.e., second-hand, events allegedly experienced by an acquaintance, a named friend or a local character;

3) 'Detached', i.e., third-hand, without source attribution or identification of the protagonists.

The more unambiguous the source, and the closer to the narrator, the more believable the story. It is important to realize that distancing is to a certain extent a rhetorical choice: narrators may choose not to name a source when this is to their advantage, or they may even tell personal experience stories as third-person narratives or vice versa. Oring refers to an example in Slotkin (1988), of a person telling a ghost story in the third person, and, a month later, as a personal experience story.

More examples can be found in the literature on legends. The British writer Roald Dahl used to entertain guests at dinner parties with his repertoire of urban legends and his own short stories, told as personal experiences (Burger 2002, pp. 137-139).[5]

Like Potter, Oring points out the advantages of the 'friend-of-a-friend' formula: "[…] a brilliant compromise in that the narrator can establish a relation to a potentially credible source without being held accountable for it" (2008, p. 135).

### D. Judgment
Oring states that discernment and judgment are the most important character traits a narrator must display to appear believable (2008, p. 135). In this respect, he lists five basic techniques: reflexivity, considering alternative explanations, showing reluctance, professing ignorance and reporting tests.

### 1) Reflexivity
Narrators may evaluate their stories from their audience's perspective and pre-empt counter-arguments reflecting on their reliability (3), e.g., "You may think I'm crazy, but…" (Correll 2005, pp. 3-4; Oring 2008, p. 136).

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[5] Other examples can be found in Wachs (1988, pp. 31-38), who came across a number of urban legends told as personal experiences when collecting New York crime victim stories; Bennett collected a story told by a relative as a dream, and later as an actual experience (1999, p. 16).

*2) Alternative explanations*

In order to make their judgment appear more sound, narrators may offer alternative explanations for their anomalous experience, only to discard them after due consideration (Oring 2008. p. 136). Since this technique pertains to logos rather than ethos, we did not incorporate it in our model.

*3) Reluctance*

The narrator presents himself as a reluctant witness: "prior to the alleged event, he did not believe in ghosts, but now…" This avowal of prior skepticism heightens the story's credibility.

*4) Ignorance*

Narrators may profess ignorance of the facts, presenting themselves as cautious witnesses who do not jump to conclusions.

*5) Testing*

Narrators may report reality checks (1), e.g., in a story about a ghost encounter, the teller might say that he waved his arms to make sure he was not watching his own reflection in the mirror (Oring 2008, p. 137).

Although Oring's bid to match legend studies with classical rhetoric proved seminal for our study, it has certain limitations. His examples, taken from an unspecified sample of legend texts, illustrate his rhetorical model of legend telling, but he does not assess their relative frequency. The legend texts are monologues, whereas legends in the wild typically appear in the context of dialogues or polylogues. Unlike the text samples used in the discursive psychology literature, Oring's examples are reconstructed speech, based on research interviews, not spontaneous discourse. Finally, Oring's rhetoric is a 'rhetoric of truth', which omits the part of the debunkers. It should be augmented by a rhetoric of disbelief (Bennett 1999; Dégh 2001; Donovan 2002; Hufford 1982). All in all, the literature on ethos (however it is labeled) offered a number of rhetorical devices we could apply to the case in hand.

## 12.4  The integrated ethos model

Based on the literature review and on a qualitative pilot study of our online discussions sample, we drew up the following model. We stick to the Aristotelian dimensions of expertise, virtue, and good will, the validity of which has been

confirmed by social psychologists (McCroskey 2001, pp. 85-87; McCroskey and Young 1981). Because of space constraints, we refer to the literature review for descriptions and examples of these devices.

Expertise
1    Reporting a reality check
2    Appealing to authority
3    Pre-empting counter-arguments reflecting on one's ethos
4    Stressing one's expertise: knowledge, experience, education
5-7  Distancing from source of narrative (either first-hand (5), second-hand (6), or friend-of-a-friend (7))

Virtue
8    Disclosing information that could harm one's ethos
9    Referring to one's honesty
10   Searching for common ground by emphasizing personal or issue characteristics

Good will
11   Complimenting and thanking the audience
12   Vilifying a common enemy

The model combines devices described in classical and in modern literature. Note that all techniques could be used by both proponents and debunkers of the claim that drink spiking is for real. By assessing the frequency with which these techniques are used by both parties, we try to improve on Oring's 'rhetoric of truth' (2008).

## 12.5  Method

### 12.5.1  Sample

Our sample consists of 25 discussions about drink spiking, published on Dutch web-based discussion boards during the years 2000-2008. These discussions were randomly chosen from a larger sample consisting of 54 discussions constructed for a study of argumentation about drink spiking (Hulsebosch et al. 2008). Most of the participants are adolescents who have an interest in dance parties and/or drugs. Typically, the discussion boards belong to community-type websites; a minority of four discussions were found on news sites, where participants do not belong to one subcultural community.

## 12.5.2 Method of analysis

A quantitative content analysis was carried out by two coders. The methodological choices involved in the content analysis of online discussions have been discussed before, although most of the literature deals exclusively with computer conferencing in closed educational environments (Marra et al. 2004; Murphy et al. 2006; Rourke et al. 2000; Strijbos et al. 2006; De Wever et al. 2006; Whittaker et al. 1998). The sticking points identified in these papers are *unitization*, coding *manifest versus latent* content and *reliability*. Briefly, the choices we made were as follows.

*Unitization*: the unit of analysis may be as small as the individual sentence, or as large as the entire discourse. The literature offers various classifications: Rourke et al. (2001) distinguish sentence, paragraph, message, thematic unit and the illocutionary unit; whereas Strijbosch et al. (2006) enumerate discourse, message, meaning, argument and proposition. In order to study ethos techniques, we opted for the message as the unit of analysis, since this is objectively identifiable and produces a manageable set of cases (Rourke et al. 2000).

During pilot analyses, however, it was found that the majority of messages consisted of bursts of invective or (to a lesser extent) approval. Initially we coded these as 'vilifying a common enemy' or 'praising and thanking the audience', but then we realized that these messages did contain argumentative moves, but did not use ethos as a means of persuasion. To cut out the jeering and cheering, we chose the formal criterion of message length, putting aside all messages of 50 words or less. This left 234 relevant messages.

Coding *manifest versus latent* content: manifest content, such as sentence length, word frequency and other easily observable phenomena, is suited for machine analysis. Analyzing rhetorical devices requires interpretative efforts by human coders, but the inherent subjectivity this entails is held in check by the assessment of inter-coder reliability.

*Reliability*: various practices are described in the literature to ensure inter-coder reliability. Not uncommonly, one coder identifies segments in which the sought-for phenomenon is present; the second coder then has to identify the phenomenon (Pander Maat 2004). Since this comes down to the second coder second-guessing the first one, we opted for the more severe design of two coders independently analyzing pre-defined units, i.e., the relevant messages.

A number of indexes are used to report inter-coder agreement. Percent agreement is a common measure, but in our view this is too liberal, since this

fails to account for agreement by chance (Lombard et al. 2002). We used the more conservative Cohen's Kappa instead. Values above 0.75 are generally considered to be good to excellent, those below 0.40 poor and those in between fair to good (Neuendorf 2002; De Weever et al. 2005). One of the drawbacks of Cohen's Kappa is that it fails to compute when both coders do not use the same range of codes (for instance, when coder 1 uses 1, 2, 3 and 4, and coder 2 uses 1, 3 and 4).

A final problem common to this type of content analysis is that the sought-for phenomena are typically scarce. In the latest pilot test we conducted, half of the variables were not found in the test sample (table 12.1).

**TABLE 12.1** LATEST PILOT TEST

| Ethos technique | Cohen's Kappa | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| | Believers | Debunkers |
| Reporting a reality check | * | Not found |
| Appealing to authority | Not found | Not found |
| Pre-empting ethos attacks | .527 | .464 |
| Stressing one's expertise | .034 | 1.00 |
| Distancing (first-hand) | .706 | 1.00 |
| Distancing (second-hand) | * | Not found |
| Distancing (third-hand) | * | Not found |
| Disclosing harmful information | .634 | Not found |
| Referring to one's honesty | Not found | Not found |
| Searching for common ground | Not found | Not found |
| Complimenting & thanking | * | Not found |
| Vilifying common enemies | .571 | Not found |

* = Cohen's Kappa failed to compute

## 12.6 Results

The 234 relevant messages were found to contain 217 instances of ethos techniques, i.e., a mean score of 0.93 per message. 173 were used by believers, 44 by debunkers. Al in all, believers used more, and more varied, ethos techniques than debunkers (but the same amount of arguments (figure 12.1)).

FIGURE 12.2 THE FIVE MOST FREQUENTLY USED ETHOS TECHNIQUES
(PERCENTAGES) (BOTH GROUPS)
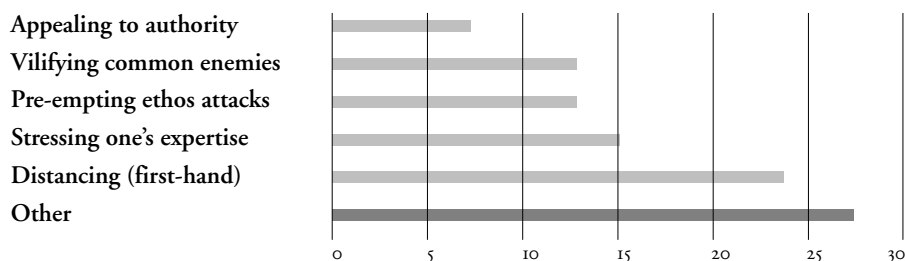


The most common technique in our sample was telling first-hand stories, which was used 52 times (24%). Stressing one's expertise was used 33 times (15.2%), pre-empting arguments reflecting on one's ethos 28 times (12.9%) (figure 12.2).

FIGURE 12.3 THE FIVE ETHOS TECHNIQUES MOST COMMONLY USED
BY BELIEVERS (PERCENTAGES) (N=173)
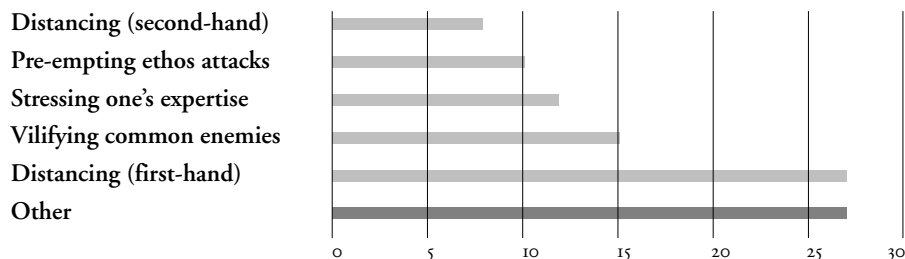


Proponents of drink spiking as a genuine threat never explicitly referred to their honesty, but they did use all the remaining eleven techniques. Most common were first-hand stories (46 times, 26.6 %), vilifying common enemies comes second (26 times, 15%), stressing one's expertise third (22 times, 12.7%) (figure 12.3). Debunkers used ethos techniques less often than believers (44 versus 173 times). Moreover, their repertoire is less varied (9 different techniques versus 11). Reporting a reality check, telling second-hand stories and complimenting and thanking the audience were not found in debunking messages. Of the 44 instances of ethos techniques used by debunkers, stressing one's expertise was most common (11 times, 25%). Pre-empting attacks on one's ethos was used 10 times (22.7%), appealing to authority 7 times (15.9%) (figure 12.4).

FIGURE 12.4  THE FIVE MOST COMMONLY USED ETHOS TECHNIQUES
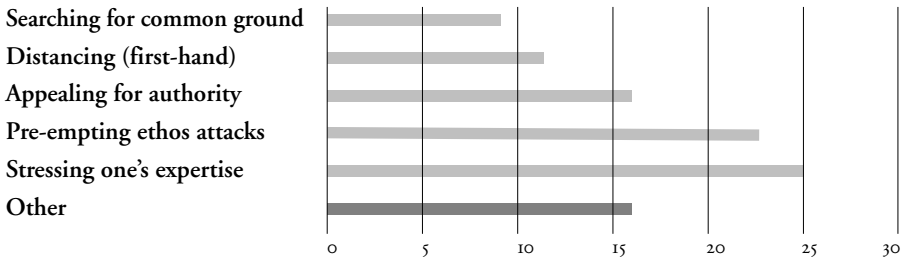BY DEBUNKERS (PERCENTAGES) (N=44)



TABLE 12.2  ETHOS TECHNIQUES IN DISCUSSIONS ABOUT DRINK SPIKING (25
DISCUSSIONS, 234 RELEVANT MESSAGES)

| Believers | N | % | Debunkers | N | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1) Reporting a reality check | 1 | 0.4 | 13) Reporting a reality check | 0 | 0 |
| 2) Appealing to authority | 9 | 4.14 | 14) Appealing to authority | 7 | 3.22 |
| 3) Pre-empting counter-arguments reflecting on one's ethos | 18 | 8.2 | 15) Pre-empting counter-arguments reflecting on one's ethos | 10 | 4.6 |
| 4) Stressing one's expertise: knowledge, experience, education | 22 | 10.13 | 16) Stressing one's expertise: knowledge, experience, education | 11 | 5.06 |
| 5) Distancing from source of narrative, category 1: first-hand | 47 | 21.65 | 17) Distancing from source of narrative, category 1: first-hand | 5 | 2.3 |
| 6) Distancing from source of narrative, category 2: second-hand | 14 | 6.45 | 18) Distancing from source of narrative, category 2: second-hand | 0 | 0 |
| 7) Distancing from source of narrative, category 3: third-hand | 10 | 4.6 | 19) Distancing from source of narrative, category 3: third-hand | 2 | 0.92 |
| 8) Disclosing information that could harm one's ethos | 14 | 6.45 | 20) Disclosing information that could harm one's ethos | 2 | 0.92 |
| 9) Referring to one's honesty | 0 | 0 | 21) Referring to one's honesty | 1 | 0.4 |
| 10) Searching for common ground by emphasizing personal or issue characteristics | 9 | 4.14 | 22) Searching for common ground by emphasizing personal or issue characteristics | 4 | 1.84 |
| 11) Complimenting and thanking the audience | 3 | 1.38 | 23) Complimenting and thanking the audience | 0 | 0 |
| 12) Vilifying a common enemy | 26 | 22.22 | 24) Vilifying a common enemy | 2 | 0.92 |
| Total | 173 | 79.7 | Total | 44 | 20.3 |

## 12.7 Conclusion

Our integrated ethos model is based on Oring's (2008) application of classical rhetoric to folk legends (the 'rhetoric of truth'). We improved on this model by adding techniques from other sources and by applying the model to believers and disbelievers alike.

One of the aims of this study was to assess the validity of the ethos techniques described in the literature. Of the classical techniques, explicit references to one's honesty and complimenting and thanking the audience were hardly found at all. The others, however, were. Classical techniques were augmented by devices identified in more recent studies. For instance, the concept of distancing (or *footing*) proved a useful modern addition to Aristotle.

Both parties participating in the discussions about drink spiking use ethos as a means of persuasion, but believers use more and more varied ethos techniques. Apparently, the burden of proof is on them – they have to work harder to appear sensible and reliable persons. They stand to lose more than their opponents when their personal stories are dismissed as urban legends and their requests for advice remain unanswered.

Of the three Aristotelian ethos dimensions experience, virtue and good will, the first is used the most by both parties. Believers often refer to specific personal experiences, i.e., they claim to be the victims of drink spiking. Disbelievers typically do not counter these claims with their own personal experience stories, but rather stress their experience as party-goers or drug users. Appeal to external authorities plays a minor role for both parties, as does an appeal to their own formal education and position. For the last point, we have to rely on the coders' personal impressions, since we did not distinguish between references to informal experiences and formal education.

Although the discussions can be quite uncivil (as witnessed by the large number of messages consisting of invective), there *is* a discussion going on. In fact, both parties attempt to bolster their ethos by searching for common ground and pre-empting counter-arguments: they don't want to appear too dismissive or gullible, too distrustful, too much in favor of or against drug use. They generally agree that it is good to be careful and that drug use should be a free choice. The character of these discussions supports the view of the internet as an extension of the public sphere.

## 12.8 Discussion

The present study has attempted to assess empirically and quantitatively what ethos techniques are used in online discussions about drink spiking, in order to add to the knowledge base about online rhetoric. It remains to be seen to what extent the findings based on this sample can be generalized to other online discussions. The discussions in our sample probably differ from others in which personal experiences are not as centrally important. In the end, the drink spiking discussions are about making sense of personal experiences, not about making claims about public policy.

Political discussions may differ in the role they accord to education and external authority. We expect discussions in this genre to contain more appeals to the authority of experts, news media or other cultural authorities.

More research is needed, but those who want to try this should be forewarned that content analysis of online discussions is a trying and often frustrating procedure. Still, rhetorical research stands to win by collecting and analyzing internet discussions: the Web is full of massive amounts of raw and juicy, largely un-moderated rhetorical material that can be collected unobtrusively.

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