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# Providing Trustworthy Advice Online: An Exploratory Study on the Potential of Discursive Psychology in Trust Research

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**Abstract.** The Internet serves as an important source for people who are looking for information and advice from peers. Within search behavior a central role is reserved for trust; it will guide the decision to participate online, to share experiences or to pick up information. This paper explores insights from discursive psychology as a potentially interesting approach for trust research in online peer environments. This allows for a certain shift of focus. Instead of looking at the information seeker, we focus on the information provider: How does he try to present himself – and the information sources he refers to in his arguments – as trustworthy and authoritative? Within this theoretical perspective trust is being studied as something that is highly negotiable depending on context and the effect the information provider tries to achieve. Throughout the paper conversation fragments - collected from an online forum on home-improvement - are incorporated to clarify and illustrate some central concepts of discursive psychology.

**Keywords:** trust, footing, cognitive authority, experiential knowledge, factual versions, category entitlements, discursive psychology

## 1 Introduction

The Internet is an important source for people looking for information, advice or the opinion of peers. This paper is part of a broader research project where we try to understand how trust emerges in online environments where people – who do not know each other outside the platform – come together to share experiences and exchange advice or information. Think of online forums and review sites - such as for example TripAdvisor<sup>1</sup> or Epinions<sup>2</sup> - but also consumer reviews displayed on retail websites like Amazon<sup>3</sup>. Trust plays an important role in the decision whether or not to participate and to share and pick up information [1][2][3]. However, the focus of this specific paper is not so much on how trust occurs between individual people online or which factors will ensure the creation of trustworthy feelings towards the online con-

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<sup>1</sup> [www.tripadvisor.com](http://www.tripadvisor.com)

<sup>2</sup> [www.epinions.com](http://www.epinions.com)

<sup>3</sup> [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)

tribution of a specific person. Rather, we explore a discursive psychology approach as a means to understand how participants in these online environments try to present themselves and the sources they refer to in their arguments as being trustworthy and authoritative. In addition we also investigate how their messages provide insight into what people consider to be trustworthy sources and how this is being discussed online. When it comes to research related to this topic, studies often emphasize the information seeker's side[4]. Far fewer studies focus on those individuals who provide such online environments with advice. The empirical part is also often directed to questioning the information seeker instead of analyzing naturalistic records. This while online discussions – where the “truth” of a message is being settled – can provide an alternative view on trust in information sources [5]. The work of authors like McKenzie [6], Neal and McKenzie [7] and Tuominen and Savolainen [8] offer such an alternative approach. They concentrate on online conversations in order to comprehend information use, and to understand how the value of sources is being negotiated online. The work of these authors departs from social constructionism and discursive psychology. In this study we look at how insights from this theoretical perspective can offer a potentially useful approach to perform trust research.

A discursive approach allows us to understand the way forum members seek to present their advice as being trustworthy and correct. It permits to focus on how members try to justify their own opinions, advice or information, and which claims other members use to reject the opinions, advice or information from others. By identifying the claims and practices people use to substantiate their own opinion or to undermine the advice of others, we gain insights into how members of a community collectively construct the reliability and authority of certain information sources. People seek to substantiate their advice, using external sources as well as peer / own experience as a source of knowledge. The choice of a particular source possibly represents what kind of resources these people find viable and useful within a certain context. Forum members will refer to a particular source in their arguments when they believe this source can back up their own opinion. So either they believe this source is trustworthy and/or they believe other people consider this source to be trustworthy.

## **2 Structure and Approach**

This paper is structured as follows: During the first section we briefly discuss some problems and insights we encountered while starting up an exploratory qualitative analysis of forum threads. It is within this specific context that discursive psychology will be introduced as a potentially interesting and alternative approach to studying authority and trust. We briefly explain the main principles of a discursive approach in social psychology and continue with the work of Potter [9] on the construction of factual accounts. Here, the emphasis is on how people try to strengthen their statements via those strategies that either aim to manage the nature of the author of an argument, or construct a description that seems to be created independent of the forum member himself. The paper ends with a conclusion and a clear link to further research – which will be a thorough discursive analysis of forum threads and inter-

view transcripts. In order to elucidate the structure, we will spend a short paragraph explaining our approach and case study. Throughout this paper we will frequently use some online conversation fragments in order to clarify and illustrate certain theoretical concepts, and also to immediately apply these concepts to our own case study. The excerpts that are being used are part of a larger data set containing 380 forum threads collected from an online Belgian/Flemish home-improvement forum in the winter of 2012/2013. Some ethical considerations on the use of online and publicly available data can be read in the appendix of this paper.

### **3 Case Study of an Online Home-Improvement Forum**

Home-improvement is a popular topic in Belgium/Flanders, where almost three-quarter of families own their own home [10]. The choice for a platform on home-improvement was motivated by the fact that people in the process of home-construction or -improvement are often forced to take decisions on subjects they do not fully know and understand. According to the Belgian employers' organization active in the construction sector – *Confederatie Bouw* – the sector is evolving rapidly. Everything needs to be greener, more sustainable, quicker and cheaper. At the same time everything is also becoming more technical and complex as new products, materials and construction processes enter the market. This makes it much more difficult for homeowners to make a decision, and staying informed becomes ever so important [11]. The online forum “*Bouwinfo*” – with 400 000 unique visitors per month and around 3 000 active members – seems to offer a way for people to get information on home-improvement tasks. On this discussion platform, people gather to exchange information and advice, or to swap experiences. 80% of the forum contributions are made by private individuals: people who are not active in the construction sector [12]. This implies that information being shared on *Bouwinfo* is often strongly related to personal experience or experiential knowledge [13], instead of professional knowledge. But what can the conversations on *Bouwinfo* tell us about the way people select and discuss information sources?

### **4 Who is Entitled to Make Knowledge Claims Online?**

If we were to ask forum members – in our case people occupied with home-improvement tasks – the kind of information sources they prefer when it comes to renovation and construction work, we would never get an unequivocal answer. Setting aside the fact that their feedback would strongly depend on individual preferences – some people count more on the advice of a professional than others – the answer would also depend on the context they have in mind when we question them, and on what these people already know about the subject matter. While analyzing the selection of forum threads, we noticed the same type of variation in how people on the discussion board would construct, accept or reject certain claims, opinions or advice. For example, the experiences *Bouwinfo* members often referred to can be divided into two different categories, each linked to a different type of source. Experiences

in the first category are linked to the construction professional – or a person working in the construction sector. Experiences in the second category are linked to the experienced homeowner – or a person occupied with or experienced in performing a home-improvement task. In some occasions one of two categories was used to support or boost a message, while in other occasions the same category was given as a reason for skepticism.

In the following fragment (figure 1) a forum member, who – as we could see in his user ID – is a professional landscaper, presents forum members with information based on his own experience. In the first part of this fragment [A], the emphasis is on experience as an argument to eliminate the possible idea that the information table has an official character. In this way our member reduces the potential risk of liability: *“it is not something official, it is just based on my own experience as a landscaper”*. Throughout the second part [B], he presents his professional experience as justification of his claim to possess trustworthy knowledge. In order to do that, he questions the value of studies carried out by an official research centre. Within just two lines, he uses his own experience as a landscape professional to hedge (*“certainly not official”*), to claim knowledge (*“100% experience”*), and to undermine the authority of another source (*“without some kind of WTCB hassle”*).

*“[A] Below you find a table with indications on moss growth, certainly not official! [B] 100% experience without any study or some kind of WTCB<sup>4</sup> hassle”*  
Thomas<sup>5</sup> (member since 2007 – over 3000 messages)

**Fig. 1.** Professional experience as a claim of knowledge – Discussion about keeping paving tiles moss-free

In a next example, instead of using the experience of a construction professional to boost a message, the authority of the construction professional is being questioned. In the first fragment (figure 2 – different discussion) a member rejects the advice of a construction contractor as a suitable source of information within the specific context of soil stability.

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<sup>4</sup> WTCB is the Scientific and Technical Centre for the Construction Industry. It is a Belgian private research institution whose main task is 1) to perform scientific and technical research, 2) to provide technical information, assistance and advice to its members and 3) to contribute to the overall development and innovation in the construction sector [14].

<sup>5</sup> All quotations are translated from Dutch and provided with a pseudonym. Only year of membership and an approximate number of messages are recorded. Other features about membership were retained. A motivation for this decision can be found in the appendix; where we discuss some ethical considerations.

*“It is perfectly possible **that your construction contractor has years of experience ... But even then I would not trust him when it comes to advice on foundations.** In this case you just order a stability study with a structural engineer whose study will be based on your plan and soil investigation”<sup>6</sup>*

Iris (member since 2009 – over 500 messages)

**Fig. 2.** Questioning the authority of a construction professional – Discussion about piled foundations

In the third fragment (figure 3 – different discussion) the member goes one step further. She states that *“they say a lot”*, using “they” to refer to people in the gardening/construction sector. The forum member tries to undermine the authority of construction professionals by implicitly suggesting that they do not know what they are talking about. She even goes so far as to state that the only people entitled to provide guidance are the ones with personal experience.

*“[Brand X] is in my opinion the best brand. Why don't you go with [brand Y]? I have had a [brand Y] lawn mower for years and it has a very strong engine. **“They” say a lot but personal experience is the only true measure. I may be a woman but I know what works and what doesn't.**”*

Tessa (member since 2012 – over 100 messages)

**Fig. 3.** Questioning the authority of a construction professional – Discussion about lawn mowers

The way one constructs or downgrades the authority of either construction professionals or homeowners clearly varies based on the context of a conversation and the goal one wants to achieve – for example persuading versus rejecting. It is therefore not possible to state that the advice of a construction professional will prevail over the opinion of peers with experience or visa versa. There is no generally accepted attitude or opinion regarding the authority of a particular source. Whether a person has the right to speak with knowledge, can be seen as situational and variable; something that is negotiated within a particular context and constructed to fulfill a specific function. This is exactly where the perspective of discursive psychology / social constructionism / discourse in social psychology can offer an important approach! It illustrates what Potter and Wetherell [15] mean when they mention that an empirical claim can also emphasize the need for an analysis of discourse. According to the aforementioned authors, studying variation in utterances and accounts from a realistic approach would cause some difficulties in displaying this variation. Instead of eliminating variation, variation itself becomes the topic of research within discourse research in social psychology [15].

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<sup>6</sup> All of the original fragments were displayed in a regular font. We use a bold font in order to emphasize certain components in the text.

## 5 An Introduction to the Discursive Psychology Approach

Trying to find your way through discursive psychology literature can at best be confusing. This is partly so because the name only came up during the 90's, while the approach itself emerged much earlier. Initially – during the late 80's – authors referred to “discourse [analysis] in social psychology”; such as for example in the pioneering work of Potter and Wetherell [15]. It isn't until a few years later – when the field has already expanded and deepened – that the name discursive psychology pops up [16]. Discursive psychology or discourse in social psychology (DP) is seen as one of the main but less mainstream approaches and positions in social psychology [17]. At the same time it is also more than just an approach: “*it is an alternative metatheory or a different philosophy of science* [17]. It implies a specific approach to social and psychological phenomena; and is sometimes considered both a method and a theoretical perspective [18]. Potter however recently emphasized DP as being more an approach than a method whose “*basic methodological and analytic principles follow from its meta-theoretical, theoretical and conceptual arguments [...]*” [16]. Discursive psychologists believe that many of the phenomena – studied as internal mental processes within traditional psychology – are actually created within discourse. Based on this premise, DP therefore implies both a theoretical and methodological shift of focus [19]. Within DP, a researcher examines “*how psychological issues and objects are constructed, understood and displayed as people interact in both everyday and institutional situations.*” [16]. From this respect, the decision on who can be considered an authority in the field of construction work will not be made in the individual minds of people. The right to speak with authority will be discussed, negotiated, settled and questioned again within everyday conversations on the discussion platform of Bouwinfo. The emphasis is on social practices and not on the individual cognitive process. The most obvious – but not the only – way to study such issues is by working with naturalistic data [15] [16]. Texts – in the broadest sense of the word – that are not developed or designed to serve the needs of a researcher. Forum conversations can therefore be seen as natural texts.

An important starting point in many studies and handbooks on DP explains the focus within DP as a focus on discourse<sup>7</sup> itself – discourse as the primary object of study or “*as a topic in its own right*” [15]. This is directly opposed to the vision of cognitive and traditional social psychological approaches in which language is often regarded as a window through which the world reveals itself, or as a mirror that exposes the inner state of the speaker/writer [8]. DP does not explain discourse as a result of or a medium for an inner mental state [15][20][21]. It puts the referential function of language – or language as a means to bring about the social reality – and the expressive function of language – or language as conduit for the feelings and attitudes of the speaker/writer – between brackets [18]. The central focus of discourse analysis within social psychology can be illustrated by referring to the concepts of

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<sup>7</sup> Potter and Wetherell [15] define discourse – based on the work of Gilbert and Mulkay (1984) – as including all forms of spoken interaction and written texts, both formally and informally.

variation, function and construction [8][15][22]. Language allows for the creation of a particular version of social reality. Forum members describe their own experiences with certain home-improvement activities and give their version of events. The concept of variation becomes clear when we realize that different versions of an event can be constructed. Discourse is constructive in the sense that through language people – members – construct their version of the world, it is not a perfect reflection of reality. In order to do so, members rely on what Potter and Wetherell call *pre-existing linguistic resources*, which makes discourse not only constructive but also something that is constructed [15]. This highlights the influencing role of culture, history and context. Language is also oriented towards action: for example, through discourse people can try to justify their accounts, or they can question the accounts of others. So there exist both a variety of versions, as well as a variety of functions, purposes and goals.

## 6 The Creation of Factual Versions

DP shares a similar interest with rhetorical psychology: they both emphasize the way people use arguments in their talk. Within DP this translates into studying fact construction in everyday conversations [21]. Within this study we have been guided by the work of Potter on the construction of factual accounts. By managing either the nature of the producer of a description, or by constructing a description that seems to be created independently from the producer of the message, people seek to construct their messages as factual [9]. In the next section concepts such as factuality, cognitive authority, category entitlements and footing are discussed based on both theory and examples from our data set.

Conversations on the forum of Bouwinfo tend to be shaped around the exchange of advice, opinions and information. What stood out while analyzing the conversations was that members try to substantiate their claims based on different strategies and different types of evidence. One way to justify a claim was to try and present their advice as being a fact. On other occasions members also tried to undermine the advice of others. This was done by *inter alia* asking about the source of a member's argument or by questioning a member's interest in formulating advice. This was for example demonstrated in section 4 of this paper.

In the fragment below (figure 4) forum member Jonas provides his advice with a sense of factuality by adding a reference to an important Belgian research institute on construction. Isaac and Freddy however question the integrity of Jonas and suspect him to be a construction professional in disguise. They base their suspicion on the fact that Jonas has made two extremely positive contributions about one specific brand.



“That is correct. But I don’t know the products of [brand X]. I do know that the products of [brand Y] **have a WTCB certificate** – I believe [Brand X] has no certificate – and that they are **a lot cheaper.**”

Jonas (member since 2012 – less than 10 messages)

“Nice first message! You probably have no interests in this company? 😊”

Isaac (member since 2010 – over 100 messages)

“Exactly the same holds for his second message: [url towards specific thread]. Apparently his shares are on the decline 😊”

Freddy (member since 2009 – over 2000 messages)

**Fig. 4.** Questioning the integrity of a member – Discussion about solutions against humility

This finding strongly aligns with what Potter describes in his work “*Representing Reality: Discourse, Rhetoric and Social Construction*” [9]. In chapters 5 and 6 he focuses on the way people seek to equip their claims with a touch of factuality and on the strategies people use in order to avoid the accusation of a conflict of interest. This contrasts highly with those studies who try to grasp the nature and the correctness of arguments or who try to link arguments to the interests of people. The author addresses the notions of *stake*, *entitlement* and *footing* as important concepts when constructing or undermining factual versions [9].<sup>8</sup> What these concepts have in common, is that all three of them refer to the identity of the producer and how this identity can contribute to the creation of factual versions or arguments [9]. The conversation mentioned above shows a clear link with the concept of *stake* or *interest* and involves a very explicit accusation addressed to Jonas. In the work of Potter, these kinds of accusations are not discussed. He does not look at how people assign certain interests to the utterances of others. Instead his focus is on how people seek to construct versions that are resistant to accusations such as a conflict of interest [9].

## 6.1 Stake Inoculation

A specific rhetorical strategy people can use is what Potter [9] calls *stake inoculation*. Potter [23] mentions a nice comparison in order to clarify this concept: “*Just as flu inoculation is intended to prevent flu, a stake inoculation is intended to prevent a claim being undermined as a product of stake.*”. Looking back at the text fragment and the contribution of Jonas, Jonas indicates implicitly that the products of brand Y are better than the products of brand X. Recommending a specific brand without any kind of motivation or argument makes a recommendation vulnerable; it might give

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<sup>8</sup> Besides stake, footing and entitlement – which emphasize how the identity of the producer can be managed – Potter also formulates some techniques aimed at creating – what he calls – “*out-there-ness*”. Techniques such as *empiricist discourse*, *active voicing* and *detail and focalization* all share that “[...] they construct the description as independent of the agent doing the production”[9].

rise to the idea that there is a certain degree of self-interest involved. Think for example of the contributions of Isaac and Freddy where they accuse Jonas of trying to sell his own products. Jonas seeks to substantiate his preference for a certain brand by making reference to a “neutral” – in this case scientific – source. However, based on this fragment it becomes clear that stake inoculation does not always make a success story.

## 6.2 Category Entitlements

Another way in which an argument can be injected with some “truth” or credibility, is when the speaker (or author) is assigned to a certain category of people who can claim certain knowledge – or what Potter calls *category entitlement*: “*people in particular categories – official and unofficial – are expected to know certain things or to have certain epistemological skills.*” [24]. In this case you do not need to ask how it is that someone knows something. The mere fact that this person belongs to a certain category is sufficient; it qualifies this person as being knowledgeable or as having expertise. Who is considered knowledgeable also depends on the specific context and the specific category [9]. Potter further emphasizes that entitlements are not inherent to a certain category. (Knowledge) entitlements are worked up, constructed and built up [9]. This ties in with the work of Horton-Salway. Based on the work from inter alia Hester and Eglin (1997) she emphasizes the ethnomethodological notion of “*culture-in-action*” or the fact that one should have attention for “*the situated nature of knowledge claims and the local recognition of cultural categories and members’ related entitlements.*” [25]. She cites Hester and Eglin (1997) who state that categories are learned and get meaning within the context in which they are used. According to Horton-Salway [25] it is therefore important that an analyst is aware that membership within a certain category and its related knowledge entitlements are established within a local context. It is not something a priori or fixed. This vision on knowledge claims, categories and member’s related entitlements is in line with the view of discursive psychology.

## 6.3 Cognitive Authority

A clear link can be found between category entitlements and the concept of cognitive authority. In the following paragraph cognitive authority is first discussed as a notion derived from cognitive psychology. Afterwards, based on the work of McKenzie [6], the concept is being explained as something that is constructed within conversations and connects more with discursive psychology and the notion of category entitlements. In “*Second-hand knowledge: An inquiry into cognitive authority*” Patrick Wilson [26] makes a distinction between cognitive or epistemic knowledge and administrative or performatory knowledge. In a later journal article for *Library Trends* he clearly summarizes these two distinct types of knowledge. Administrative authority relates to the position someone has. This position allows a person to give orders and hand out punishments if necessary: “*Administrative or performatory authorities [...] are authorized to do or command or forbid something [...].*”. Within this article

the focus is on cognitive authority or authority based upon claims relating to a specific type of knowledge: “*Cognitive authorities are authorities **on** something [...].*” [27]. Yet you cannot assign yourself the label of a cognitive authority. According to Wilson it is important that others recognize you as an authority. He links this to social perception and recognition: “*It is not what you “really know” but what others think you know that gives you authority; you get cognitive authority by getting others to think you know things.*” [27]. You can be recognized by one, by some or by all as someone who knows things within a certain domain. For example, in the fragment below a forum member of Bouwinfo (Sil-figure 5) refers to the opinion of a construction professional in order to back up his own point of view. This suggests that our member considers this professional to be someone who has cognitive authority on the level of insulation materials.

*“I would reject the use of [product X] because it is a foil. **My [insulation brand] installer said** that I should preferably use hard insulation plates. This would prevent the material to be blown against the roof tiles”*

Sil (member since 2007 – over 500 messages)

**Fig. 5.** Referring to a cognitive authority in argument – Discussion about roof insulation

*“Oh my, **I don’t know whether your installer knows** how to place a foil. The foil should be firmly fixed so that it becomes impossible to flit against the roof tiles. **Did this constructor accidentally happen to sell [brand] ecological insulation plates** instead of a dirty chemical PE [polyethylene] or PU [polyurethane] foil? In my own house I will blow insulation flocks against a (correctly positioned) foil. **The contractors that have been down here didn’t mention that there was anything wrong with this approach.**”*

Mark (member since 2011 – over 1500 messages)

**Fig. 6.** Questioning authority and integrity – Discussion about roof insulation

Yet we can see in the remainder of the conversation that not every member shares the same vision on who can or cannot be considered an authority on the level of roof insulation. Mark (figure 6) questions the authority and the independence of the construction professional mentioned by Sil (figure 5): “*I don’t know whether your installer knows [what he is doing]*”. He also tries to undermine the credibility of this advice by referring to the possible interests this contractor may have: “*Did this constructor accidentally happen to sell [...]*?”. When people mention that someone is an authority on a certain subject, this can either mean that everyone agrees that this person is an authority on [insulation material] or this can mean that one sees this person as an authority and that one believes that others should feel the same way [26]. This makes for an interesting approach: Whom do people – occupied with construction work and home-improvement tasks – see as authoritative sources? And how is this label of authority being negotiated in online conversations?

We also need to have attention to what Wilson [27] calls the “scope” of authority. Let us continue with the example of the discussion about roof insulation. Our installer in fragment 1 (figure 5) can be considered someone who is knowledgeable on the level of construction work, on insulation materials, or as someone who is only knowledgeable when it comes to roof insulation. The area in which someone has knowledge varies from a very broad range – construction work – to a very small part – roof insulation. The “degree” of authority can – besides having a scope from narrow to broad – vary from little to a lot. According to the forum member, his installer has plenty of authority since – implicitly – our member is willing to adjust his entire approach to the opinion of his insulation installer. A final question Wilson [27] asks is “*What leads us to recognize a person as having authority?*”. He makes a distinction between people who are somewhat knowledgeable themselves – who can test the person both formally and informally – and people who are not knowledgeable – and who will have to rely on reputation or performance. Previous research also indicated reputation and performance as key elements for trust [4].

**Cognitive Authority, Credibility and Trust.** Within our wider research on the emergence of trust in online textual environments, trust is being operationalized as “*the degree to which someone is willing or considering to follow up the advice of (a) forum member(s).*”. Based on a literature review on trust we found that this willingness to trust someone is influenced by identity, reputation, expertise and experience [4]. A link between trust, credibility and cognitive authority can also be found in the words of Wilson [26]: “*The person whom I recognize as having cognitive authority is the one whom I think should be allowed to have influence on my thinking, for I suppose he has a good basis for saying what he does. [...] The authority’s influence on us is thought proper because he is thought credible, worthy of belief.*”. When you consider a person as an authority within a certain domain, you will be more willing to trust them. The extent to which someone is recognized as someone with cognitive authority, will be closely related to reputation, expertise and experience. Yet with regard to our own research context, we could question what type of people are being acknowledged as an authority. Who is sufficiently competent so that we are willing to follow up this person’s advice concerning a construction or renovation project? Which knowledge claims – professional versus experiential – are important and how are they being negotiated online?

**Cognitive Authority Online.** The work of McKenzie [6] and Neal and McKenzie [7] is interesting related to the concept of cognitive authority. These authors use the concept as a framework to understand how an individual makes a decision on the authority of an information source. The first study looks at how pregnant women search for information and describes the context-specific discursive techniques these women use to either augment or undermine the authority of a source. The second study tries to understand how bloggers with a chronic disease present certain information sources as (not) being authoritative and how these bloggers use these versions of authority to substantiate their own claims. Both studies argue that traditional ideas on cognitive

authority should be revised when you study the concept in an online environment. Instead of focusing on the cognitive process of an individual and how this person tries to determine whether or not a certain source is important, both authors consider authority – or an authoritative source of information – as something that is negotiated collaboratively on a community level. McKenzie [6] therefore prefers the concept of “cognitive knowledge” from Jordan (1977) since this notion acknowledges the role of the community in defining which information sources can be seen as appropriate and allows for authoritative knowledge to be defined according to the context. This view on the construction of authority is in line with the vision of social constructionism and discursive psychology.

#### 6.4 (Change of) Footing

The notion of footing originates from the work of Goffman and is mentioned in his work “*Forms of Talk*”. In this book – which is a compilation of different essays – a full chapter is devoted to the concept. Goffman [28] defines a change in footing as “[...] a change in the alignment we take up to ourselves and the others present as expressed in the way we manage the production or reception of an utterance.”. A clearer description of footing can be found in the work of Howitt and Cramer [29] where they state that “*Footing refers to whether the speaker talks as if they are the author of what is being said, the subject of the words that are being said, or whether they are presenting or animating the words of someone else.*”. This description links back to the different participant roles – or different production formats [28] – a person can take on or use when he or she is acting as a speaker or writer. The author – or the person who composed the words, the principal – or the person whose viewpoint is expressed in the message and who believes what is being said, and the animator – or the person who brings the words to the listener(s). Howitt and Cramer claim that these three types of footing do not exclude each other and thus all three of them can – but need not – be present in a text.

A shift in footing closely connects with the idea of creating a factual version; mentioned earlier. By changing your footing – for example from being both author, principal and animator of a story to being only the messenger – a person can try to create a version that seems more credible [8] [20]. A clear example of such a change in footing can be found in the following fragment (figure 7) where a forum member – after giving his own opinion in his own words – acts as an animator by transferring the words of a person whom he believes has some cognitive authority.

*“I would reject the use of [product] because it is a foil. My [insulation brand] installer said that I should preferably use hard insulation plates. This would prevent the material to be blown against the roof tiles”*

Sil (member since 2007 – over 500 messages)

Fig. 7. Change of footing in argument – Discussion about roof insulation

Here it is quite clear that the animator/writer is quoting the author of the words. Clearly the forum member is not formulating this quotation in exactly the same manner with exactly the same words. What is more important is that this member brings this message as if the construction professional has formulated this exact sentence. In this way the quoted opinion of the person with so-called cognitive authority backs up the statement from the forum member. The author links his message to a certain category of people – construction professionals – because he believes this category has a certain level of necessary knowledge. By substantiating his own opinion with the opinion of a construction professional he tries to augment the credibility of his version. However, in order to understand this change of footing, we should look at the full context of the conversation. People will try to maintain their level of accountability by producing factual versions or by shifting their footing. According to Tuominen and Savolainen [8] a change in footing will certainly become important when people try to defend a certain version which is not generally accepted – in this case for example when all previous messages would claim the use of insulation flocks instead of hard insulation plates.

## 7 Reflection and Conclusion

Within this paper we tried to consider our broader research project – on the emergence of trust in online textual environments – from a discursive perspective. The inspiration to explore this approach came from some issues that occurred while starting up a qualitative content analysis of online forum discussions. Initially we thought it would be rather easy to identify which information sources forum members referred to as being valuable and trustworthy. However, throughout this initial analysis we were faced with a variety of ways in which forum members would construct, accept or reject certain claims, opinions or advice based on a variety of sources – from so called expert sources to scientific sources, not to mention using own experience as an authoritative source. We tried to frame these issues by looking at what a discursive psychology perspective could teach us. Instead of trying to eliminate variation in accounts, variation in the discourse of people is seized as an important topic for research. Questions on forum members' attitudes or thoughts on trust – who do members believe have the authority to say something useful or who do members trust – fade into the background and questions on how people discuss authority, which strategies they use and for what purposes become the focus of research. “[...] *DP does not seek to produce knowledge of things but an understanding of the processes by which they are ‘talked into being’.*”[30]

The next step is to apply this framework to a discourse analysis of both forum threads and interview transcripts. Our preliminary results from the initial analysis will be re-evaluated based on the theoretical framework mentioned in this paper. Here we will map how forum members seek to strengthen their own advice by – inter alia – referring to what they consider as an authoritative source and how they try to present these sources as being authoritative. The findings from this analysis of forum conversations can then be weighed against the results of in-depth interviews with forum

members and forum visitors – people looking for information or advice on Bouwinfo. While both conducting and analyzing these interviews with forum members, we will have to pay sufficient attention to our role as an interviewer. Willig [30] emphasizes that within a semi-structured interview – in contrast to those texts that occur naturally – participants will adapt to the interview setting. According to the author, this would provide more information about the discursive strategies people use in an interview than the ones they apply in everyday life.

This paper used conversation fragments displayed on a specific forum in order to emphasize the difficulty in determining whom people trust. It appears that this strongly depends on context and function or goal. Trust literature widely accepts the idea of trust being something context-specific [31][32][33]. However, the examples that follow such a statement are often a bit obvious. Is it not pretty straightforward that you trust a construction professional with construction work but not with taking care of your car? To our sense, context will be even more important and specific than indicated in literature. Sometimes a person will trust a construction professional and sometimes he will trust his peers.

It should be clear that several – both online and offline – environments may be subject to a DP analysis. For our convenience we stick to the same topic. For example, consider an analysis of home-improvement blogs where homeowners talk about their decisions related to construction work. Or even websites, platforms and product manuals where construction professionals deliver content. There may be a difference in the way homeowners and construction professionals make authority claims and implicitly mention whom they trust.

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## **Appendix: Ethical Considerations in Studying Online Conversations**

The selection and collection of threads on Bouwinfo was carried out without asking the formal consent of individual members. This decision was made based on a trade off between the research context itself and guidelines mentioned in leading studies on research ethics such as the work done by the Association of Internet Researchers [34], Ess [35], Hine [36] and Pfeil and Zaphiris [37]. When selecting online conversations, entire threads were recorded – with some discussions going back to 2006. Bouwinfo has a rather high turnover; with a small core of permanent members and a large majority of members who participate less frequently and tend to drop out when construction or home-improvement works are over. Two aspects that would make it difficult to ask for consent. The General Terms and Conditions of the platform mention that conversations can be used for personal purposes and that intellectual property rights are held by the board administrator. Based on this finding, together with the observation that the forum is easily accessible for non-members and that conversations take place between adults on non-sensitive topics<sup>9</sup>, we decided to consider Bouwinfo as a public space. Of course we are aware that in reality the Terms and Conditions are often not read [38]. We also do not expect members to constantly consciously consider the public character of the forum whenever they post a message. These two aspects together might establish a feeling with members that they share their questions, frus-

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<sup>9</sup> Most of the time people on Bouwinfo exchange information or tips and trick related to construction works or home-improvement tasks. Occasionally sensitive content on personal topics (i.a about family life) is being discussed in “off topic” threads. These conversations were not included in this study.

trations and advice within a limited circle of people. Considering this short reflection, special attention will be paid to safeguard the privacy and anonymity of our members. All quotations are translated from Dutch to English. This makes it rather difficult to trace back a conversation on the discussion platform – even after one would translate it back to Dutch. Real nicknames of forum members are not included – sometimes people attach importance to their online identity and to their forum name [37] – nor the exact title of the tread. Only the broader topic is mentioned so that the reader of this paper can get a limited view on the context of the conversation. The focus in the quotations is on how forum users try to shape their advice as factual versions and not on the actual content of the conversation. Finally, permission to gather and analyze the data was obtained from the forum owner.