

Investigating Rhetorical Convergence in Healthcare Communication: A Digital Analysis of Patient-Facing Texts

Healthcare organizations operate within a competitive marketplace where patient trust, perceived legitimacy, and emotional resonance are shaped by communication strategy as well as by clinical outcomes (Asan et al., 2021; Bravishma Panicker et al., 2025). In recent decades, alternative and integrative medical practices have gained increased visibility and consumer uptake across Western healthcare systems, supported by growing patient demand for holistic, personalized, and preventative approaches to care (Fadlon, 2005). *Alternative medicine* refers to health practices and treatment modalities that fall outside the conventional medical model – such as chiropractic, massage, acupuncture, and functional medicine – while *complementary or integrative medicine* describes approaches that combine these modalities with conventional evidence-based care (Cleveland Clinic, 2021; Mayo Clinic, 2024).

Statement of Purpose

This project examines whether and how conventional Western medical practices and alternative or integrative medicine practices are converging rhetorically in their patient-facing digital communications. Specifically, the study investigates where the persuasive strategies and language used by these groups diverge versus where they overlap, and what such convergence suggests about evolving norms of authority and trust in modern healthcare.

Project Description

The study focuses on a regional corpus of publicly available web content produced by 40 healthcare organizations in southern Minnesota, including 20 conventional medical institutions (hospitals; primary and specialty care clinics) and 20 alternative or integrative practices (med spas; chiropractic offices; massage therapists). The analysis focuses on website homepages and “About Us” sections, with the potential inclusion of social media content to further clarify brand voice. This approach and sample size allows for comparison across a wide range of providers and centers on the most strategically designed patient-facing texts (Jordan & Manganello, 2009).

Methodologically, the project employs rhetorical and qualitative content analysis. Texts, both current and historical, will be coded for recurring linguistic and thematic features related to scientific credibility (e.g., references to research, credentials, and technology) and to holistic or patient-centered care (e.g., “whole-person,” “root cause,” or “personalized care”). By comparing how these features have been applied across conventional and alternative healthcare settings, the study aims to identify patterns of convergence that may indicate rhetorical isomorphism, wherein organizations in different sectors or niches adopt similar communication strategies to compete for legitimacy and trust (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Lewis, 2003; Johnson & Johnson, 2024). Preliminary observations suggest that rhetorical convergence between conventional and alternative healthcare communications may be characterized by alternative providers adopting the language of scientific authority, while conventional

biomedical institutions incorporate empathetic and holistic language historically associated with nonconventional care.

Situated within the fields of health communication and technical and professional communication, this research will contribute to scholarship on content strategy and the social impacts of technical communication (Asan et al., 2021; Mesibov, 2019). Patient-facing web copy functions as a form of technical communication that shapes public understanding of medical authority (Asan et al., 2021). By documenting how these messages are constructed, the project will offer insight into how healthcare institutions negotiate credibility and empathy in communication design.

Contribution to Scholarly and Pedagogical Development

This project directly supports my scholarly and pedagogical development as a graduate student in technical communication while advancing my professional trajectory in health communication. As my capstone experience in the Technical Communication M. S. program, this research will allow me to synthesize my academic training in rhetorical analysis and content strategy with my professional background in healthcare. The project will deepen my expertise in analyzing patient-facing materials as a form of technical communication with real-world social impact.

I plan to conduct this research over the summer and early fall, culminating in a poster presentation at the Association for Computing Machinery Special Interest Group on the Design of Communication (ACM-SIGDOC) Student Research Competition in October 2026. Additionally, the project represents a future contribution to the 2027 MNSU Graduate Scholars of English (GSEA) Conference. These opportunities will allow me to refine my ability to translate complex research into accessible presentation formats, an essential skill in both academic and professional health communication contexts.

In parallel, I am enrolled in a summer course focused on teaching technical communication, which will prepare me for a teaching assistantship in the fall semester. This pedagogical training will complement my research by strengthening my ability to guide undergraduate students in analyzing and producing effective technical and professional communication.

This project represents a critical step in developing both my scholarly identity and my capacity to contribute meaningfully to the fields of technical and health communication.

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