



## **The Impact of Direct-to-Consumer Pharmaceutical Advertising on Social Media**

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### ***Abstract***

Direct-to-consumer advertising (DTCA) is a marketing strategy that advertises prescription drugs directly to consumers instead of through healthcare providers. With the rise of social media platforms, pharmaceutical companies have implemented DTCA on social media as a way to promote their products to consumers. The aim of this literature review is to analyze the impacts of social media DTCA on consumer healthcare. I conclude there are benefits to DTCA such as increasing consumer awareness and accessibility; however, there are also concerns over the reliability of information shared on social media which can harm consumers. As the pharmaceutical industry continues to use social media as a way to market prescription drugs, it is important to do so in a way that educates consumers while reducing potential harm.

### ***Introduction***

In recent years, social media usage has skyrocketed with Facebook, Instagram, and Youtube emerging as the most popular platforms [1]. Social media has significantly changed the way people communicate and gain knowledge on various topics. On average, users spend about two and a half hours per day on social media, with 59.9% of the global population actively using these platforms [2]. Due to its wide reach, social media has become a commonly used tool for influencing consumer behavior and promoting brands. It is also an effective advertising channel: companies who use social media to reach consumers report 61% in growth revenue, and around 81% of businesses confirm its effectiveness at increasing sales [3]. Social media platforms allow brands to directly reach consumers by exposing them to various advertisements across platforms on a daily basis. Consequently, many brands incorporate social media advertising to market to consumers in hopes of boosting sales and promoting brand visibility.

Recognizing the rapid growth of Web 2.0, pharmaceutical companies in the U.S. are beginning to incorporate social media into their promotional efforts as a way to advertise their products to consumers. The pharmaceutical industry uses direct-to-consumer advertising (DTCA) to generate consumer engagement [4]. DTCA is a form of promotion that markets prescription pharmaceuticals to patients rather than healthcare professionals [5]. Pharmaceutical companies have invested approximately \$6.1 billion on DTCA, reflecting a significant shift from how these companies approach marketing on prescription medications [6]. On social media, pharmaceutical DTCA is generally found in advertisements that market a variety of medications along with reliable patient influencers that vouch for the product and inform consumers about different health conditions. DTCA plays a significant role as a pharmaceutical marketing strategy by helping businesses market medications directly to the public rather than through healthcare professionals. This route benefits businesses because it allows them to maintain brand recognition while also connecting with potential buyers. It aims to inform and persuade consumers who may be interested about specific medications, while also increasing engagement within the healthcare community [7].

The purpose of this literature review is to analyze the effects of direct-to-consumer pharmaceutical advertising on social media on consumer healthcare as well as to explore how exposure to these advertisements may play a role in the consumer decision-making process regarding their choice of medications or treatment. This topic is important to consider because it highlights how social media plays in shaping healthcare decisions and consumerism. With the growing frequency of interactions and daily engagement on social media platforms, it is important to note how such exposure can influence consumer attitudes towards specific medications and treatments, and subsequent healthcare decisions [8]. Since these platforms serve as a primary source of information for many, engagement with DTCA can shape their understanding of health-related issues, ultimately influencing their health outcomes. Understanding this topic allows us to explore how these marketing strategies can alter consumer perceptions and decisions in regards to their health, while also highlighting the connection between pharmaceutical marketing and consumer healthcare choices.

## ***Literature Review***

### ***History of DTCA***

Direct to consumer pharmaceutical advertising began well before the rise of social media, but its historical roots impact current practices. DTCA has undergone significant changes since it was first permitted in the US in the early 1980s [9]. These changes allowed pharmaceutical companies to advertise prescription drugs directly to consumers through different forms of media. Previously, the promotion of prescription medication was limited to the healthcare professionals capable of interpreting drug information for the general public; this was the safest way to ensure informed decision-making and protect the safety of patients [9].

However, with technological advancements, DTCA has expanded from traditional forms of marketing to widely used platforms like social media. Social media has become one of the most effective and used tools for pharmaceutical advertising since it enhances engagement and improves brand visibility [10]. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube allow pharmaceutical companies to directly market their products to millions of consumers that are active on these platforms on a daily basis [11]. This enables brands to better connect with their audience, as consumers can use social media to engage and interact with companies directly.

However, DTCA is controversial and is only legal in a few countries such as the United States and New Zealand. In other countries, direct-to-consumer pharmaceutical advertising is banned due to concerns about its harmful effects on health outcomes [12]. As a result, DTCA raises several controversial issues about its role in the pharmaceutical market, particularly concerning its influence on promoting prescription drugs [11].

### ***Trends in DTCA on Social Media***

With the increasing use of digital platforms among consumers, the pharmaceutical industry has used social media to promote their products [10]. Social media also allows companies to educate consumers on various diseases, treatments, and their health [13]. Some ways that these companies use social media include virtual events, webinars, and use of patient influencers [14].

Pharmaceutical companies often collaborate with influencers or health advocates in order to market their medications in a way that generates consumers' trust [15]. For example, an influencer who shares their experience with managing a medical illness might consider collaborating with a pharmaceutical brand to promote a specific product designed for the condition. Since consumers tend to be skeptical of pharmaceutical companies, these companies can build a connection with their audiences by using patient influencers and therefore improve the relationship between consumer and pharmaceutical industry [16].

Consumers are placing greater trust in receiving information from influencers rather than directly pharmaceutical companies [17]. Influencers are able to share personal stories that align with what the pharmaceutical companies are trying to advertise, making them seem relatable, authentic, and trustworthy to consumers. In addition to influencer marketing, a trend that has been rising as a pharmaceutical DTCA strategy is the use of interactive content on social media. This includes tools such as live Q&A sessions or virtual webinars, which allow consumers to actively increase engagement within brands while educating consumers on healthcare. By interacting with a brand's audience, influencers promote a company's products and establish a brand as a thought leader in the pharmaceutical industry [14].

Interactive content can also provide companies with a better understanding of their audience, which in turn, enables them to enhance their marketing strategies based on the consumers' needs and desires. This approach gives the audience a sense of involvement in their health while helping pharmaceutical companies foster a sense of trust, building a community through such engagement. As the pharmaceutical industry continues to adapt to changing trends in direct-to-consumer advertising on social media, the use of educational content and engagement will increasingly influence the way brands market their products.

### ***Positive Impacts of DTCA***

DTCA has been shown to have several positive impacts on consumer behavior, allowing individuals to become more informed about pharmaceuticals. For example, exposure to DTCA has been proven to encourage consumers to seek information about drugs, a behavior that can be shaped by various social influences [18,19, 20]. The Theory of Planned Behavior suggests that this tendency—seeking out information about prescription medications after exposure to DTCA—is driven by a person's intention to participate in that behavior and is typically influenced by factors such as subjective norms and perceived behavioral control [21]. People are more likely to reach out to healthcare professionals due to such subjective norms or social pressure, which makes consumers feel inclined to stay informed about a specific pharmaceutical they saw in a social media advertisement [22].

Moreover, individuals with a level of market mavenism not only stay informed but also contribute to influencing others through electronic word-of-mouth, further proving the impact of DTCA on social media platforms [23]. This fosters informed decision-making while enhancing patient involvement and opens better access to healthcare information. DTCA can influence consumers through the persuasive power of social media advertisements, which significantly influences treatment decisions. This persuasive effect is supported by consumers' trust in peer recommendations, such as those from influencers, over pharmaceutical sources, fostering a collaborative approach to healthcare decision-making and further promoting healthcare

conversations [11]. These social media platforms have increased patient awareness, pushing patients to seek information and take an active role in their healthcare choices, while also using marketing strategies to influence consumer behavior, raise awareness, and promote healthy behaviors [24].

### ***Negative Impacts of DTCA***

Despite the positive aspects, there are also concerns regarding the negative impacts of DTCA on social media. Opponents of drug marketing on social media suggest that DTCA spreads misinformation and overemphasizes the benefits of certain pharmaceuticals [25]. As a result, many risks arise such as inappropriate prescribing of medications, which can lead to consumers making inappropriate healthcare decisions [4]. Additionally, pharmaceutical companies can also create a misleading impression of a drug's effectiveness by deleting or editing any negative reviews, ultimately altering the consumer's perspective on the product [26]. This display of selective information that pharmaceutical companies present can lead consumers to view the drug as more effective and safer than it is, significantly impacting their healthcare choices. Some researchers argue that DTCA fails to provide quality health information that aids in healthcare decision-making, but rather contributes to expensive healthcare costs [27]. It also downplays important information about a drug's potential side effects, resulting in decisions made without a thorough understanding of the risks involved and an inaccurate impression of the drug's safety [28]. By manipulating the information being displayed, pharmaceutical companies are shaping a misleading public perception of their products and ultimately cause consumers to prioritize advertised drugs rather than medications that align best with their health.

### ***Conclusion***

In conclusion, the purpose of this literature review is to identify and assess the impact of social media on consumer healthcare, as well as to educate readers about the topic of DTCA, particularly on social media platforms. This form of marketing has introduced both benefits and concerns regarding consumer health. While DTCA on social media has increased consumer awareness and accessibility, it also raises ethical and public health concerns regarding the quality and reliability of information shared to consumers by the pharmaceutical industry. Overall, DTCA on social media is a powerful marketing strategy for patient education and involvement in healthcare; however, it requires certain regulations to ensure that consumers are making informed decisions.



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