

The Impact of Direct-to-Consumer Medication and Genetic Tests on Contemporary Lives

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INTRODUCTION

A Global community – *online* and *offline*, brings in an infinite number of perspectives on essential rights like freedom of mind & expression, privacy, trust and safety, while beliefs in certain values and attitudes towards developments in our societies vary across the different cultures.

To the end that time is the most abiding challenge of humankind, in its endeavor to define identity, the Internet influences decisively the way in which both traditional and non-traditional individuals manage their wellbeing, among others through targeted advertisements.

A significant matter of *today* that I am exploring through my research is the connection between Web 2.0 – the virtual reality and our existing one, aiming to determine by way of this article whether our real life decisions are influenced and to what extent by the virtual direct-to-consumer (DTC) ads for medication and genetic testing. Moreover, I seek to find out if medical and 21 century healthcare practices through the virtual realm can ensure the same level of interaction as the face-to-face communication – the so-called *patient-doctor relationship*, while pointing out DTC advertising benefits versus its shortcomings and harm.

The impact of the Internet on DTC advertising for medication and genetic tests, and on our lives in general, is a topic that raises many challenges for researchers in the biomedical, social sciences, political, technical and cultural field, which I aim to address particularly in relation with the cross-cultural differences in user behavior and attitudes.

BACKGROUND

Logic will get you from A to B. Imagination will take you everywhere. - Albert Einstein

In times when the value of information is given a priori by speed, the most ardent discussions of humankind are either born or crystallized online, within a dynamic forum consisting of governments, policymakers - private and public sector representatives, the media and *the consumer*.

Online advertising, a constant of the modern societies, represents, in many fields, more than a marketing communication mechanism used to encourage, persuade and manipulate the audiences towards a desired political, ideological or commercial decision. Within the medical field, the phenomenon that became known as direct-to-consumer (DTC) advertising is an important source of information for the busy individuals, making them more aware about their wellbeing and providing them with the opportunity to participate in their own health care decisions. Yet, doctors consider that the ads have both positive and negative effects. According to the results of a Food and Drug Administration survey, released in 2004, physicians view DTC ads as one of many factors that affect their medical practices and their interactions with patients (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2013).

In many communities, the patient-doctor relationship is part of status-quo which regulates *normality*, but it seems more and more that in their endeavor for independence individuals understand the possibility to build their own treatment, to manage their healthcare, as a form of empowerment.

According to the doctors the ads for medication within the various media have both positive and negative effects on their patients and practices, while the results of US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) survey, released in 2004, point out that most physicians perceive DTC ads as one of many factors that affect their interactions with patients (US Department of Health & Human Services, 2013).

The same happens with genetic tests. Stein (2011, 2012) argues that the recent years have seen an increased availability of genetic tests that are offered by companies directly to consumers – the so-called direct-to-consumer genetic testing. The consumers receive directly the results of the tests offered in this setting range, while the only form of counseling available is provided on-line or over the phone.

As opposed to the decades when prescription drug makers promoted their products exclusively to health care professionals – that were supposed to explain drug information to their patients, starting with the early 1990s, a part of the drug manufacturers began targeting consumers directly (US Department of Health & Human Services, 2013).

Certainly, this movement – the increasing participation of patients in their own health care decisions, must be analyzed also from a sociological and historical point of view, which lies at the crossroad of old and new millennium, *the information era*, where DTC advertising has gained a prominent place, as one of the most popular promotional tools. Information and communication technologies (ICTs), especially the Internet, hold an enormous potential for individuals empowerment.

DTCA, a potentially powerful source of consumer health information, is only allowed in the US and New Zealand, while regulatory bodies like the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and Health Canada have had concerns regarding the impact of these practices on public health the ISPOR Direct to Consumer Advertisements Working Group, 2012).

The Impact of DTC Advertising for Medication and Genetic Tests on the Customer/Patient - Provider - Doctor Relationship

The relation between DTC ads and the way in which individuals manage their health care is very complex. The impact can be translated in: consumer awareness

of pharmaceutical treatments; prevalence of pharmaceutical use; morbidity and mortality rates; health care costs (Holmer, 1999).

A controversial and resourceful topic among doctors, scientists, sociologists and other stakeholders, the impact of DTC prescription drug promotion on the patient-doctor relationship, was assessed by the FDA through physician and consumer surveys, performed in 1999, 2002 and 2004 (US Department of Health & Human Services, 2013). In a world sometimes almost overwhelmed by the plurality of information sources, where very often the good impersonated the evil and vice versa, the DTC ads represent an influential health information tool, able to transform the dynamics in the patient-provider interaction (Bonaccorso & Sturchio, 2002; Viale, 2003). Among the highlights of the reiterated surveys - DTC ads impact on customers/patients, the FDA refers to: increased awareness, with respect to possible treatments, understanding of the condition and involvement in the health care process.

In terms of social psychology DTC medication prescription and genetic testing are often understood within the collective thinking as a form of empowerment, associated with efficiency and control. However, from a medical point of view, the ads entail major risks to one's health, in the absence of professional counseling (the ISPOR Direct to Consumer Advertisements Working Group, 2012). Without a physician's surveillance the ads could negatively affect patient-provider interactions by increasing patient requests for unneeded or expensive medications, or for medications that may be inappropriate and harmful. At the same time, DTC ads may not present properly alternative non-pharmaceutical treatment options and can induce consumers a false sense of security with respect to reliability of advertised treatments.

The debate whether DTC ads for medication represent a positive development or a mischief is nowhere near of being depleted (Holmer, 1999; Adeoye & Bozic, 2007; Bonaccorso & Sturchio, 2002; Semin & Aras, 2007), and many voices criticize harshly companies' increasingly practices of addressing regular customers, non professionals. Yet, doctors trust patients' understanding of the need to seek professional health care services, in order to benefit the most appropriate treatment, as 82% responded either "very well" or "somewhat" when asked whether they believe that their patients understand that only a physician can decide if a medicine is right for them (US Department of Health & Human Services, 2013).

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