

Direct-to-Consumer (DTC) Prescription Drug Advertising on Television and Online Purchases of Medications

William J. Vigilante, Jr.

Robson Forensic, Inc.
Lancaster, Pennsylvania 17603 USA

Christopher B. Mayhorn & Michael S. Wogalter

North Carolina State University
Raleigh, North Carolina 27695-7650 USA

Abstract

The present research explored several aspects concerning risk communication via direct-to-consumer (DTC) TV advertising and the purchase of prescription medications over the Internet without a prescription. Results indicate that participants frequently encounter DTC TV ads; exposure can lead to further information-seeking; and physicians tend to fill requests for DTC advertised drugs. Relatively few reported making Internet purchases of prescription drugs without a prescription. Potential implications are discussed.

Introduction

Direct-to-consumer (DTC) advertising refers to mass media promotion of prescription drugs to the public. This practice has been steadily increasing in the last decade via media outlets such as television (TV) and print sources.

Current U.S. law requires that DTC drug ads convey both risks and benefits. However, research suggests there is an imbalance favoring benefit over risk information (e.g., Vigilante & Wogalter, 2001).

Research suggests that DTC ads influence interactions between doctors and patients (Findlay, 2002). However, research is limited on whether DTC advertising prompts people to seek information.

Concurrent with the proliferation of DTC ads is the dramatic growth in Internet use. Drugs can be purchased online that bypass physician's restrictions (Hubbard, 2004).

Several questions are investigated:

- Are DTC TV ads frequently encountered?
- Do people seek information as a result of exposure?
- Do people ask doctors for DTC-advertised drugs and are those requests fulfilled? and
- How do people conceptualize the prescription drug purchases via the Internet?

Method

Data was collected in the Fall of 2003. Basic demographics were recorded such as age, gender, and student vs nonstudent. There were two groups: (a) 94 non-student adults from North Carolina (53% female, age $M=41$ years, $SD=15$), and (b) 119 NC State University undergraduates (45% female, age $M=21$ years, $SD=2$).

Participants estimated: (a) how many different kinds of prescription drugs they had taken in the last 6 months; and (b) the number of different prescription drug ads they saw on TV in the last 6 months.

Participants were asked the following Yes-No questions:

- Has a TV ad for a prescription drug ever caused you to look for or request more information about the drug?
- Have you ever asked your doctor for a prescription drug that you saw in a TV ad?
- Has your doctor ever declined to prescribe a prescription drug that you requested after having seen it in a TV ad?

Rating questions were:

- How likely they would be to talk to their doctor about a drug they had seen in a DTC TV ad?
- How likely would you be to purchase prescription drugs on the Internet in the future?
- How likely would you be to purchase prescription drugs on the Internet without a prescription from your doctor?

The rating scale for the above questions was: (1) extremely unlikely, (2) very unlikely, (3) unlikely, (4) somewhat unlikely; (5) somewhat likely, (6) likely, (7) very likely, (8) extremely likely.

Lastly, participants rated their belief about the safety of purchasing prescription drugs on the Internet without a doctor's prescription. The scale used was: (1) extremely unsafe, (2) very unsafe, (3) unsafe, (4) somewhat unsafe, (5) somewhat safe, (6) safe, (7) very safe, (8) extremely safe.

Results

Participants reported taking an average of 1.96 different kinds of prescription drugs in the last 6 months ($SD=2.1$). Females ($M=2.53$, $SD=2.3$) reported taking more (different) prescription drugs in the last 6 months than males ($M=1.46$, $SD=1.9$).

DTC TV Advertisements

Participants reported seeing an average of 8 different prescription drugs advertised on TV in the last six months.

- 16% reported that a DTC TV ad led them to look for more information about the drug.
- 15% reported that they have asked their doctor for a prescription drug after seeing a DTC TV ad.
- They were 'somewhat likely' to talk to their doctor about a drug for an ailment they had after seeing a DTC TV ad.
 - Females ($M=5.62$, $SD=1.5$) reported being more likely to talk to their doctor than males ($M=4.89$, $SD=1.8$).

5% reported that their doctor declined to prescribe them a drug that they had seen in a DTC ad.

Purchasing Prescription Drugs on the Internet

Only 2% of participants reported having purchased prescription drugs over the Internet without a prescription. They reported being 'unlikely' to do so in the future ($M=2.54$, $SD=1.7$), and being 'very unlikely' to do so without a doctor's prescription ($M=1.90$, $SD=1.4$).

- Males ($M=2.16$, $SD=1.5$) reported being more likely to purchase drugs without a script than females ($M=1.62$, $SD=1.2$).

In general, they reported believing it 'unsafe' to purchase prescription drugs on the Internet ($M=3.31$, $SD=1.7$). However, these ratings differed by gender and student/non-student status.

- Males ($M=3.70$, $SD=1.7$) believed that it was safer than females ($M=2.89$, $SD=1.5$).
- Non-student adults ($M=3.61$, $SD=1.8$) believed that it was safer than students ($M=3.07$, $SD=1.5$).

Discussion

Participants reported seeing an average of 8 DTC drug TV ads during the previous 6 months. Since 2003 when the questionnaire was administered, DTC ads have become more prevalent. Current data would probably show greater exposure and resulting effects than reported here.

Some participants (16%) reported engaging in information seeking as a result of DTC ad exposure. Although this number is not large, it suggests a benefit of DTC drug ads in prompting patients to discuss treatment options with their doctors. Only 5% of the participants reported that a doctor declined to prescribe a drug they saw in a DTC TV ad. This finding also suggests an influence of DTC drug ads on patient-doctor interactions.

The data suggest that Internet purchasing of prescription drugs without a prescription is relatively infrequent — possibly due to the potential for criminal penalties, and concern about counterfeit or ineffective drugs. Social desirability might also play a part in the findings.

Although the mean ratings for the Internet purchasing questions were around 3 ('unsafe'), there were demographic differences. Non-student adults and males reported it being somewhat safer than university students and females. Overall, the results indicate that online purchasing of prescription drugs without a doctor's script may not be as prevalent as previously suggested (Hubbard, 2004). However, opinions may be changing regarding the safety of online prescription purchases, more generally, due to convenience, reduced price, and its growing adoption by health care management organizations (Fox, 2004).

The findings are consistent with recent trends in which consumers are taking a more active role in their health care decisions. This contrasts with the older health care model in which consumers passively accepted their doctor's treatment decisions.