

**CONSUMER PROTECTION REGULATION AND USER-GENERATED CONTENT
IN THE PHARMACEUTICAL INDUSTRY**

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Description

This research explores the unintended byproducts of and potential consequences for consumers as a result of legislative and regulatory guidelines meant to protect them, which we call a value void.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research Question

What happens when consumers are overwhelmed by the amount of information or lack the kind of information, they want about prescription drugs?

Literature Review

Although pharmaceutical companies' promotional activities and regulation around drug promotion have not advanced, the advent and pervasiveness of the internet have fundamentally changed consumers' needs and, more importantly, their interactions with companies about the products they consume. Consumers have evolved from passive recipients of marketing action to active co-producers of value and meaning as marketing has shifted from a transactional orientation to a relationship-focused orientation (Vargo and Lusch 2004).

User generated content (UGC) is particularly helpful and powerful in the healthcare and pharmaceutical industries as consumers use UGC to learn about the experiences of others, as it can provide consumers not only with information about experiences, general sentiment, and agreement but also with direction in the form of recommendations (e.g., Lantzy et al. 2021; Villarroel Ordenes et al. 2017; Tang, Fang, and Wang 2014). UGC also provides value through support. Naslund and colleagues (2014) find that consumers use online content as a means to find peer support for medical conditions and learn from shared experiences.

Given the importance of UGC in the pharmaceutical industry as part of a consumer's quest for better health, we propose a value-void perspective that places the consumer at the center as an active participant and co-creator of content and thus value. Regulating or managing content must be responsive to its presence.

Conceptual Framework

We propose a value void perspective which we define as unintended consequences of regulation in the age of digital and social media. Specifically, we examine content-based value voids resulting from pharmaceutical regulation, the overwhelming amount and nature of content provided by producers, and the lack of value-providing content sought by consumers in a form that is accessible and easily processed. Our examination highlights three characteristics of these specific types of voids: (1) Content-based value voids exist when relevant and value-based content is absent or non-existent, (2) Relevant information may not exist from the consumers' perspective for a variety of reasons, and (3) Consider whether consumers can process the information that is presented to them.

Although information may be available to consumers about prescription drugs, value voids can still exist because this information is outdated or incomplete, is not in a channel preferred by consumers, and/or is not easily accessed or understood. We believe that consumers attempt to satisfy these unmet needs by creating UGC as well as seeking it along their customer journey. Online UGC may appear more relevant, accessible, clear, inclusive, and supportive than traditional marketing efforts with DTCA.

Summary of Findings

We examine consumer-generated YouTube video reviews of the ten most prescribed antidepressants to show how consumers fill this void. Our final dataset of 65 videos contained 525 minutes of UGC content about prescribed antidepressants to show how consumers fill this void. Our final dataset of 65 videos contained 525 minutes of UGC data (8 hours of videos; N = 65) and received almost 3.5 million views, 12,061 likes, 617 dislikes, and 3,500 comments.

The data set was iteratively coded in accordance with grounded theory and hermeneutical analysis until theoretical saturation was reached and no new insights emerged (Glasser and Strauss 1967; Thompson 1997).

Our qualitative analysis found that sharing included documenting their journey, sharing their drug experience, and helping others. Several consumers stated that they made the video due to a value void and a lack of information. Consumers reported that they searched YouTube for information because they found doctors, therapists, and the internet to be too clinical or inadequate. Thus, accurate data is accessible but not always readily available. Consumers sought engaging, pertinent, and personalized information regarding the drug experiences of others to assist them in deciding whether to take these essential medications.

Statement of Key Contributions

We argue that the treatment of consumers as passive recipients of pharmaceutical-related information that need protection is outdated as these new channels have shifted power to consumers and facilitated their active engagement in co-producing value. Our discussion of the value void perspective will have implications for regulators such as the FDA, pharmaceutical manufacturers, and consumer well-being. Our conceptualization of this gap in the information consumers want about prescription pharmaceutical drugs makes several contributions.

First, it shifts the focus from the manufacturer and regulator to the consumer. It is responsive to what the consumers' content needs are for their pharmaceutical buying and experience journey and considers whether these needs are being met. The value void perspective is inherently flexible and can be applied to other industries where information is

regulated - or in need of moderation - to protect consumers' safety. Further, by focusing on the consumer and their content needs, our perspective is communication channel-agnostic. As the digital transformation of healthcare (and other industries) continues and innovations emerge, any perspective used to develop consumer-facing content-based policy needs to guide this policy without becoming outdated quickly.

References are available upon request.