Pharmaceutical industry in India is one of the most growing markets. In present digital times, everything is going digital. With the increased use of internet in every field, users are also searching health related information online. With the continuous rise of internet users in India, pharmaceutical companies have a potentially large ‘online’ market that they can influence using social media. Most of the companies are present on the digital platform. Social media is one amongst the most preferred digital marketing tools. The pharmaceutical companies have made information related to drugs, their pricing, disease awareness campaigns and other such data available on their website, social media platforms and blogs. The consumers search online for drug prices, drug brands, its availability, side effects, substitutes available etc. Pharmaceutical companies are developing their marketing strategies on the basis of data collected online from their consumers. Most of the marketing professionals used Social media for their company’s brand creation and were neutral to use social media for professional communication. However, there is lack of privacy and data reliability were main concerns in the use of social media by marketing professionals. The collected data by pharmaceutical industry could be used as repositories, pharmaceutical companies can also use such data to gain an improved insight in the needs of patients and doctors. Social media can make the consumer centric model of the Indian Pharmaceutical industry stronger by gaining market and customer insights. Thus pharmaceutical companies should accept social media and add it to their marketing strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become a key marketing term in the industry.1 In urban India the number of social media users were estimated to be 101 million in December 2018, according to a report, released by Internet and Mobile Association of India. Since dawn of the internet in late ‘90s, India has also become a part of the digital world with over 460 million users online in 2018 alone.2 Social media users in urban India were expected to grow by 19% between June and December that year.3 The report further found that 19.8 million users use mobile phones to access social media platforms in urban India.4

Not surprisingly industries from different sectors such as banking to retail are using social media to start new marketing strategies and engage their target audience.5 However the pharmaceutical industry seems to be lagging behind other industries.

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pharmaceutical companies to engage with social media are at best low risk and less innovative than those used in other industries. In terms of social media advertising, as mentioned by Facebook likes, Novartis has been reported to have topped the charts as compared to GSK, Dr. Reddys Labs, Sun Pharma and Piramal (July 2019). Novartis also has the maximum followers as compared to others.6

Healthcare and especially pharmaceutical companies can have a potentially large ‘online’ market that they can influence using social media. Medaid and Park report that 90 per cent of all Internet users in India search for healthcare-related information with around 70 per cent searching for specific medicine-related information. With such a large number of internet users searching for medicine and health-related information, a lot of information is generated by patients on various social media which are both interactive and cost effective when compared with offline advertising.7 This information includes patient feedback, sharing of experiences etc. Companies, therefore, stand to gain invaluable customer/patient feedback by just listening in on conversations conducted by patients on social networking websites and contributing wherever applicable.

However according to a study by the IBM institute for Business Value, “Fade or Flourish: Rethinking the role of life sciences companies in the healthcare ecosystem”, while most pharmaceutical companies have started alternative channels such as the internet, they continue to rely on push marketing instead of communicating with the customers about the issues they face. The study reports the internet is not that effective when it comes to Sales and Marketing. The content on hundreds of distinct websites is often old and mono-directional in communicating.

Pharmaceutical companies can acquire a vast amount of data from various social media, used by their customers, which then can be used for formulating sales and marketing strategies.8,9 However, an IBM study which surveyed Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) showed that 100 percent of life sciences CMOs felt ill-prepared to deal with the vast amount of information. Additionally, many of those interviewed from life sciences (including pharmaceutical) companies (90 percent) were worried about the impact of social media. However, approximately 73 percent of them indicated they planned to increase the usage of social media technology over the next few (3-5) years to manage big data and about 35 percent were actually planning to use social media parameters to measure success in marketing.

The pharmaceutical marketer has been slow to adapt to the creative use of “direct-to-consumer (DTC)” strategies now nearly commonplace in packaged goods and even business-to-business enterprises. According to a study which surveyed 200 US based Sales and Marketing executives from the pharmaceutical industry, the top strategic priorities for these executives were reducing costs, mastering multi-channel marketing and improving digital effectiveness. Nearly one in four direct sales force interactions had been replaced with digital interactions for targeting doctors, providers, payers and patients and the use of such interaction was planned to go up by 26% over the next 2 years. This offers pharmaceutical companies the advantage of more immediate access to large stores of aggregated data as well as lower cost, and more ways to connect with patients and caregivers through multiple channels.

Recently the USFDA has published some draft guidelines on its web site, for the use of social media by the pharmaceutical industry. It is expected that the guidelines will allow pharmaceutical and biotech companies to engage more freely in social media communications. Sanofi has proved to be one among early entrants in India by utilizing the social media landscape in India for its brand of flu vaccine. They created the ‘Mothers against Flu’ campaign, where they targeted ‘DigiMoms’ or mothers who regularly access social networking sites. This helped them identify and build a target community for their flu vaccine. They launched the campaign on Facebook and through this page, organized a number of polls, quizzes, discussions centered on the topic of common flu and flu vaccines. The campaign has generated more than 52,000 likes to date, with more than 3,000 in the first month itself.10

A recent white paper by Tata Consultancy Services suggests that the Indian pharmaceutical industry can monitor conversations on social media. Some of the areas where listening could benefit the industry were understanding the effects of drugs in real time, monitoring off label use, educating and engaging patient communities, interacting with Sales personnel, getting insight into patients’ experiences, brand positioning etc.11

There are very few studies regarding the use of social media by Indian pharmaceutical companies. The present study was initiated for the following reasons:

- To understand the potential role of social marketing in the Indian pharmaceutical industry
- To study the perception of industry professionals, advertising professionals and medical professionals about the role of new technologies of communication, specifically through social media networks.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The principal method was questionnaire based surveys done to get the feedback of the participants. 25 marketing professionals from the Indian pharmaceutical industry, 20 advertising professionals who had pharmaceutical clients and 20 doctors were surveyed for their knowledge about social marketing and its uses in the pharmaceutical industry. Three different kinds of questionnaires were prepared for the three different kinds of professionals. Responses of the participants were collated and simple analysis of the responses was done to understand the awareness and uses of social media in the industry. Participants were also asked about whether they knew of any brands which employed social media marketing and also about the potential problems which could be faced during such activity.

**RESULTS**

*Perception of pharmaceutical industry professionals of social marketing*

92% of industry professionals (product managers and consultants) reported that they were aware of social marketing and 46% stated that their organization did use some form of social media communications.
Respondents were then asked about their views on the use of social media for communications with doctors and patients. 60% were positive while 12% were negative. 28% were neutral about the usage. Of the 60% who viewed the usage positively, only 1/5th was highly positive. No one was completely negative (Figure 2). Only 4% felt worried about the usage.

88% respondents felt that social media could contribute to make the consumer centric model of the pharmaceutical business stronger. 88% respondent also felt that social media could have a positive impact on the image of pharmaceutical companies. No one thought the impact of social media could be negative (Figure 5).
Perception of Advertising professionals

Not surprisingly, all agencies had heard of social marketing. 41% also reported that they knew about pharmaceutical companies who used social media marketing (Figure 6).

![Figure 6](image_url)

**Figure 6** Awareness about various social media and their use in the Indian Pharmaceutical industry

Of the various social media, social networking sites and blogs and micro blogs were the most well known among advertisers. Virtual communities, virtual game worlds, content communities and collaborative projects scored less (Figure 7).

![Figure 7](image_url)

**Figure 7** Awareness of different social media amongst advertising professionals

Advertising firms listed different companies such as Pfizer, Cipla, and Abbott etc. in response to a question about prevalent practice in the pharmaceutical industry; they were very positive about the use of social media citing speed, simplicity, reach, acceptability as indicators. However they were worried about offending doctors when breaking the traditional lines of communications with the doctors. They were also concerned about the openness of such communications and their possible misuse. Advertising firms felt that, despite the strict regulations governing the industry in India, social media could be used effectively for awareness campaigns, establishing help centers, patient support programs and starting disease education programs. They also felt that the media communication which works best for pharmaceutical cos. were public relations communications and a one-one sales force supported by web network (Table 1).

Table 1 Responses of Advertisers to questions about Social media marketing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Which pharmaceutical communities use social media marketing?</th>
<th>Pfizer, Cipla, Abbott, Astellas, Dr. Reddys Ltd, Novartis, J&amp;J, Merck, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Boehringer Ingelheim, Ranbaxy, Piramal, Unichem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| What do you think are the advantages of social media marketing? | • Fast and quick  
• Simple form of media  
• Additional channel for customer support  
• Reaches out to the masses  
• High acceptability  
• Direct interaction platform |
| What do you think are the downsides of this form of marketing? | • Privacy issue and misuse  
• Still growing market with a lot barriers in the mind of the users and viewers  
• Doctors may be offended if the traditional communication chain is broken  
• Lack of accuracy  
• Awareness campaign  
• Help center  
• Patient support groups  
• Disease education program |
| With regulations governing the pharmaceutical industry how could companies use social media effectively? | • Public Relation Publications  
• Public Relation Newsletters  
• One to one sales force  
• A web network that supports the Medical Representative |
| What form of media communication you think is the best for a pharmaceutical company? | • Public Relation Publications  
• Public Relation Newsletters  
• One to one sales force  
• A web network that supports the Medical Representative |

Perceptions of medical professionals

More than 30 % doctors spend 30-60 min online every day. An equal number spend less than 30 min online. 7% doctors don’t access the internet at all while 6% spend more than 3h and another 6% spend more than 5h on the internet (figure 8).

![Figure 8](image_url)

**Figure 8** Time engaged online by doctors

75% doctors visited social networking sites. The most frequented site was face book (70%), whereas sites like twitter, orkut and linked in were shared equally the remaining doctors (fig. 9)
25% doctors spend up to 5 minutes daily on social sites and another 25% spent 5-15 minutes. 1/5th doctors spent up to 25 minutes another 1/5 spend between 25-35 minutes. The remaining spent more than 35 min daily on social sites ifg.10).

60% doctors were aware of social marketing by pharmaceutical industry. They were aware of companies like Ranbaxy (Revital), GSK, Abbot, Novartis using social media to promote their brands. Not a single doctor felt social media to be the most or least effective. 60% felt that they were good (rating 3). 70% doctors stated that they would like to view information received through social media (fig. 11).

**Table 2 Responses of Medical professional**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is your view on this form of communication?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Informative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Are you aware of any pharmaceutical company using it? (If, Yes please mention the name)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ranbaxy (Revital), GSK, Abbott, Novartis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What do you think are the advantages of social marketing over traditional media?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wide access and communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People oriented media of communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant updating is required</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**DISCUSSION**

**Industry’s perception**

While the Indian pharmaceutical industry is aware of social media, only 12% of the respondents were highly positive about the use of social media for communication. However 61% respondents were willing to use social media and no one was completely negative. About the use of social media, 88% respondents felt that social media could make the consumer centric model of the industry stronger and 88% of these felt that social media could have a positive impact on the image of pharmaceutical cos. No respondent felt that this would be most effective media for communication. This would probably explain why no respondent was willing to spend more than 50% of their current expenses on social media. Majority respondents (38%) were willing to spend 5-10% of their current expenses on social media.

It appears from the above that the pharmaceutical industry is ambivalent about its embracing the use of social media. While seeing potential in its use as evidence by a willingness to spend, overall positive view about its uses and impact on the industry, only 41% felt that it could be effective as a means of brand communication. No one thought it to be completely effective nor did anyone think it would not be ineffective.

**Advertising firms’ perception**

Advertising firms, who have pharmaceutical clients, are aware of the use of social media by pharmaceutical companies such as Pfizer, Cipla, Abbott, Dr. Reddy’s lab, Novartis etc. While citing the advantages of social media such as speed, simplicity, reach, acceptability and being an alternate but direct channel of communication, many felt that a one on one sales force works well for companies.12 Good public relations would be an effective tool for communication. Many felt that the barriers posed by the strict regulations governing the pharmaceutical industry could be mitigated to some extent by using social media for awareness campaigns, patient support groups and help centers and disease education programs.

They were worried about the misuse of social media and felt that since this was a growing market there would be lot of barriers in the mind of users and viewers of social media. It had a lot of potential for misuse and high risk of lack of accuracy. Doctors depend a lot on medical representatives for their information and there was a risk of offending doctors if this traditional line of communications was broken.

**Doctor’s perception**

While more than 90% doctors spend time online, 75% doctors visited social networking sites, the most common of which was Facebook. Other sites like twitter, LinkedIn and linked in were visited equally. The use of these sites was not insignificant since 40% of the doctors spent more than 15 minutes online while 50% doctors spent less than 15 min online on social networking sites. 60% doctors were aware that pharmaceutical companies did use social media for marketing and 70% doctors said that they would prefer to receive information through social media indicating they were open to such communications. However while no single doctor said that such media were not effective, nor did any doctor say these would be totally ineffective. Doctors felt that social media are
useful for managing information. They believed that these were very people-oriented, provided wider access and visibility and high ROI. However, they were worried about reliability of information received through such media. They also cited technological problems such as connectivity and lack of accessibility in rural areas and elsewhere. Doctors felt that there was high risk of misinterpretation of information and also that the information conveyed should be limited to prevent self-medication. They were wary of the possible misuse of this media and felt that constant updating would be necessary.

CONCLUSION

Overall it appears that while social media do find acceptance in the pharmaceutical industry, no one was willing to depend on these totally. The different stakeholders were in favor of a combined approach i.e., a one-one sales force supported by the social media. There was a high degree of wariness associated with the use of social media for pharmaceuticals purposes. There were concerns about the lack of privacy during the use of social media and the reliability of information put up on social media, thus stressing a need to put regulatory guidelines in place for this kind of communications when used by the pharmaceutical industry. These media can be used as a repository for information from doctors who were quite willing to use such media. Pharmaceutical companies can use such data to gain more insight in the needs of patients and doctors. This would help them in projecting their brands in a better manner and retain customer loyalty. They can provide information needed both by doctors and patients in a fruitful and satisfying fashion. Social media can make the consumer-centric model of the Indian Pharmaceutical industry stronger by gaining market and customer insights. Thus pharmaceutical companies should embrace social media wholeheartedly and make them part of their marketing strategy while conforming to the regulatory guidelines in place.

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How to cite this article:


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