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Critiquing Issues in Traditional Chinese Medicine through Online Advertising for Responsible Direct-to-Consumer Marketing

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Abstract

Purpose of Research: Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) has gained widespread recognition in mainland China and other non-Chinese area, driven by factors such as rising healthcare costs, growing health consciousness, and cultural affinity for traditional practices. The growing popularity of TCM has spurred the proliferation of Direct-to-Consumer (DTC) advertising, offering convenient and accessible avenues for consumers to learn about and purchase TCM products and services. Despite its potential benefits, TCM online advertising also presents challenges that need to be addressed to protect consumers and uphold the integrity of TCM (Zhou, Li, Chang, & Bensoussan, 2019).

This research critically examines the ethical and safety challenges associated with the online marketing of TCM which aligns well with the conference theme that emphasizes the importance of strategic communication in addressing various societal challenges. This research delves into the realm of health communication, specifically focusing on TCM and its online advertising practices. By critically examining the ethical and safety challenges associated with the marketing of TCM, particularly through Direct-to-Consumer approaches, the study contributes to the understanding of responsible communication in the healthcare sector. Furthermore, the paper engages with the broader theme of ethical considerations in strategic communication, shedding light on issues such as ambiguity, deception, and manipulation in the context of TCM marketing. Despite gaining global attention, TCM faces significant issues in its promotion through online platforms, particularly concerning DTC marketing.

Theoretical Approach and Framework: The paper adopts a comprehensive theoretical approach to analyze the ethical dilemmas and safety concerns within TCM marketing. It proposes a conceptual framework designed to address these issues, emphasizing transparency, authenticity, and ethical practices. The framework is grounded in principles of regulatory compliance, consumer education, and empowerment for informed decision-making, aiming to foster cultural sensitivity in TCM marketing practices.

Research Questions: The research addresses four key questions, including:

1. What are the ethical and safety challenges associated with the online marketing of TCM, particularly through DTC approaches?
2. How do misinformation and false claims on online platforms impact consumer perceptions of TCM products and therapies?
3. What is the safety and quality concern related to the sale of unlicensed or counterfeit TCM products online?

4. In what ways can a framework for responsible DTC marketing mitigate these challenges and promote ethical practices within the TCM industry?

Methods: The paper critically analyze existing literature, case study, and empirical evidence related to TCM marketing (e.g., Lim, Chock, & Golan, 2020; Park, Lee, Song, Bose, Shin, & Kim, 2012). It synthesizes information on regulatory oversight, misinformation, safety and quality concerns, and ethical dilemmas associated with DTC marketing. The conceptual framework is developed through review of relevant literature and practices in marketing ethics.

Key Findings: The research identifies three primary issues in TCM marketing through online advertising: a lack of regulatory oversight, misinformation and false claims, and safety and quality concerns. It highlights the potential health risks posed by unlicensed or counterfeit TCM products sold online. The conceptual framework proposed in the paper addresses these findings by emphasizing regulatory compliance, transparency, and consumer education.

Social & Practical Implications: The exploration of issues in TCM marketing through online platforms, with a focus on responsible DTC marketing, presents a timely and critical analysis. Drawing parallels with the case study on consumer perceptions of online advertising for weight loss products, this critique aims to evaluate the strengths and potential areas for improvement in understanding and addressing the challenges within the TCM industry.

Implementing the proposed conceptual framework for responsible DTC marketing in TCM holds practical implications for the industry. It can mitigate ethical concerns, safeguard consumer health, and promote responsible marketing practices. The framework encourages industry stakeholders to adopt transparent communication, comply with regulations, and prioritize consumer education, contributing to the overall well-being of consumers and fostering a more ethical TCM marketing landscape.

Keywords: Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), Online Advertising, Direct-to-Consumer (DTC) Marketing, Ethical Issues, Conceptual Framework, Responsible Marketing.

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