Pharmaceutical Advertisements for Arthritis: The Portrayal of Disability and Gender

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Pharmaceutical Advertisements for Arthritis: The Portrayal of Disability and Gender*

The goal of this qualitative, exploratory study is to examine how ability, health, and gender are represented in advertisements for drugs that treat moderate to severe arthritis. Through a content analysis of 53 pharmaceutical advertisements for 14 different drugs advertised in 21 issues of the Arthritis Today magazine (2010-2013), the idealized expectations created by these drug manufacturers is examined. Advertisements for arthritis drugs were selected because arthritis is the most common physical condition and the most common cause of disability in the United States. It also disproportionately affects women.

Even though arthritis affects millions of people in the U.S. alone, little research has been done on how pharmaceutical treatments are advertised. While some prior research has focused on the effects of direct-to-consumer (DTC) advertising and whether DTC advertisements give enough information for consumers to make informed decisions, it lacks a focus on the societal implications of DTC advertising. The need for research that focuses on messages in pharmaceutical advertisements is further supported by the rapid growth in spending on DTC advertisements from millions of dollars in the 1990s to billions of dollars by the early 2000s, and the role of advertisements in creating and reinforcing social expectations. Like other advertisements, pharmaceutical advertisements portray society’s standards and norms. Thus, this project aims to answer the question: how are disability, health, and gender portrayed in the advertisements?

To better understand what ideals are being depicted, advertisements were coded for manifest content (e.g., men, women, able-bodied, disabled, nature, indoors) and latent content (e.g., gender stereotypes among activities such as caregiving, shopping, cooking). The dichotomies of able-bodied/disabled, healthy/unhealthy, and masculine/feminine empower some while disempowering others. How these dichotomies manifest and embody standards and norms such as hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity is explored.

Findings reflect that a majority of depictions are of women rather than men, able-bodied rather than disabled people, and occur in nature rather than indoors. The message that people need to be healthy and pain free is emphasized by portraying more people as able-bodied. This is reinforced by portraying people in nature, which suggests that people need to be healthy, young, and full of life. Within the advertisements individuals are consistently shown representing traditional gender expectations. For instance, in advertisements women are more likely to be shown in supporting roles such as caretakers, homemakers or exercising; men are more likely to be shown participating in sports, showcasing their strength, and being in control. The implication of these advertisements is that the way to live up to these socially constructed expectations is by taking the advertised drug. Thus it is suggested that without the advertised drug a person will be in pain, disabled, and unhappy. Because health is presented as being easily achieved through use of the drug, the realities of arthritis are diminished. Diminishing the realities of arthritis can be problematic because the way society views and treats those affected by arthritis could be impacted by the sometimes unrealistic portrayal of pharmaceutical users as the perfect embodiment of health and ability.

*This scholar and faculty mentor have requested that only an abstract be published.