HOW CONSUMERS PROCESS PREVENTION-ORIENTED DIRECT-TO-CONSUMER ADVERTISING MESSAGES: A CONCEPTUAL PAPER

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ABSTRACT

Today, one of the most prevailing ways to inform the public of available prevention methods is through Direct-to-Consumer (DTC) advertisements. As the debate among interested researchers and policymakers continues regarding the pros and cons of DTC advertising, understanding how consumers process these messages, in order to make them more effective, is necessary, if we ever hope to increase prevention behavior and potentially decrease disease cases.

Many attitude change and information processing models have been developed to explain how consumers process, interpret advertising messages, form/change attitudes and make decisions. However, there has been limited research on how consumers process prevention-oriented advertising messages, as most attitude change and information processing theories have been developed for products and services that usually contain a lower level of risk than health-related decisions. This paper aims to fill this gap in research by providing a conceptual framework for how consumers process prevention-oriented DTC messages.

Following an information-processing theory commonly used in the consumer behavior field, the *Elaboration Likelihood Model* (ELM), this proposed framework focuses on the cognitive and affective processes that occur after exposure to a stimulus and before the behavioral response to that stimulus. Past research has also applied the ELM on health-related topics, such as HIV prevention, but lacked the theoretical background of incorporating health related theories in their considerations. Thus, the inclusion of such theories is important in order to understand how attitudes are changed or formed and how they impact the likelihood of engaging in prevention behaviors.

Three health behavior theories provide the health-related constructs for the development of the proposed framework. These are: a) Rosenstock's (1988) *Health Belief Model* (HBM), b) Witte's et al. (1998) *Extended Parallel Process Model* (EPPM), and c) Prochaska's et al. (1992) *Transtheoretical model* (TTM). The TTM is used to combine the previously discussed theories (ELM, HBM and EPPM), by being interpreted as a hierarchy of effects model for changing or forming preventative behaviors. In doing so, the case of the HPV vaccine, as prevention method for Human Papillomavirus infection (also called HPV) is employed to give context to the conceptualization of the framework being proposed. The HPV vaccine is the first STD and cancer prevention vaccine.

The proposed framework provides a first step towards social change by explaining how prevention-oriented DTC advertising messages can influence the attitudes and behaviors of individuals towards their engagement in preventative actions, such as getting vaccinated against HPV. Apart from this framework's limitations, such as the criticism regarding the measurements that have been used in the past to examine some of the proposed constructs and the difficulty of validating frameworks that involve many constructs, this paper has much to offer to both academics and practitioners.

By combining a popular information processing model with health behavior theories, it does not only extend the knowledge of the two fields, but also provides some basic guidelines for advertisers regarding how to make prevention-oriented DTCA messages more persuasive, an issue that has certainly warranted attention from pharmaceutical companies and health communicators around the world. Additionally, it also provides a comprehensive review of the origins of this proposed model, by describing the meanings and logical adequacy of the proposed constructs and relationships, as well as it is generalizable to most prevention-oriented health issues. Future endeavors should focus on testing this theoretical model and applying it to the development and implementation of prevention-oriented DTC messages, in the hopes of becoming a prevention-oriented society.

References available upon request.