

Emotional Connections in Health Messaging: Advertising Insights for an effective communication

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Abstract

The study explores the effectiveness of type 1 diabetes (T1D) advertising and communication strategies considering the patient's perspective. according to a healthcare management perspective. Using a qualitative approach, we conducted 3 focus groups with 15 T1D patients in Italy. Our findings reveal four key themes central for patients in consideration of the advertising messages they receive from drug and medical device manufacturing companies: the importance of authentic communication, the role of social media in community building, the complex relationship with pharmaceutical companies, and the crucial role of emotional engagement in health messages. These insights can contribute to the development of more effective, patient-centered communication strategies in healthcare management, with implications for both theory and practice in healthcare communication and pharmaceutical marketing.

Keywords: *Health advertising; Effectiveness of campaigns; Health Communication, Pharmaceutical Marketing*

Introduction

Diabetes represents a growing global health challenge: according to the most recent World Health Organization (WHO) reports, 566 million adults worldwide are living with diabetes, and this number is expected to reach 700 million by 2035. In Europe, the disease affects about 60 million adults while in Italy, according to the latest Italian Barometer Diabetes Report (2024), the prevalence of diabetes is estimated at 5.9% of the population. This is increasing significantly among individuals over 75 years of age who reach 21 percent. Diabetes occurs mainly in two forms: type 1 diabetes and type 2 diabetes. Type 1 diabetes (TD-1) is an autoimmune disease in which the immune system destroys the beta cells of the pancreas, which are responsible for insulin production. This condition requires external administration of insulin to keep blood glucose levels under control (Quattrin et al., 2023).

Ensuring that advertising messages are based on scientific evidence allows for the provision of reliable information to the public, helping people understand the importance of following prescribed medical treatments and adopting healthy lifestyles (Sharma et al., 2024). In addition, the spread of misinformation can lead to the worsening of the disease and its complications, increasing the risk of cardiovascular disease, blindness, and kidney failure (Sodikov et al., 2024). Proper information is essential to counteract the spread of harmful practices and to ensure adequate support in managing the condition.

While there is extensive research on the medical aspects of diabetes management, there is a significant gap in understanding how communication strategies by healthcare organizations and pharmaceutical companies are perceived by T1D patients. This gap

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is particularly evident in the Italian context, where cultural nuances can influence the effectiveness of healthcare communication. Through a qualitative analysis conducted through three focus groups with Italian patients with type 1 diabetes, this study aims to fill this research gap by examining T1D patients' perceptions of current communication strategies.

Theoretical background

In the context of health communication, narrative engagement theory (Shen et al., 2015) suggests that storytelling can be a powerful tool in delivering health messages. This aligns with the marketing literature on emotional branding (Thomson et al., 2005), which emphasizes the role of emotional connections in consumer engagement. Previous research demonstrates that campaigns that tell success stories of people effectively managing their diabetes while providing practical information have proven particularly engaging and persuasive (Shen et al., 2015). Despite these advances, the main challenge remains to maintain public attention and promote long-term sustainable behavioral changes (Kite et al., 2023). To address this challenge, it is critical to understand the perceptions and experiences of people directly affected by diabetes, an approach supported by patient-centered communication theory (Schiavo, 2013).

Advertising plays a key role in disseminating health information to the public (Ghahramani et al., 2022). Companies, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies employ advertising strategies to educate and raise awareness about various health issues, including the risks, prevention, and management of chronic diseases such as diabetes (Koelen & Van den Ban, 2023). Diabetes advertising campaigns make use of different communication strategies. For example, some campaigns use “fear appeals” to emphasize the risks associated with unhealthy behaviors (Kianersi et al., 2023). However, Witte and Allen (2000) have shown that the most effective campaigns are those that combine these warning messages with information about the effectiveness of preventive actions, demonstrating that change is possible and beneficial.

Diabetes-specific studies, such as that of Cherubini et al. (2021), have shown that campaigns that combine educational information and emotional reminders are particularly effective in improving knowledge and promoting healthy behaviors. An example would be a campaign that tells success stories of people effectively managing their diabetes while providing practical information on managing the disease.

Methodology

We employed a qualitative research design, conducting three focus groups with a total of 15 T1D patients in Italy. Participants were selected using purposive sampling (Nyimbili, & Nyimbili, 2024), ensuring diversity in age (20-30 years), educational level, and duration of T1D diagnosis, as the research focused on understanding their perceptions and communication experiences about the disease. The focus groups were conducted using the Zoom online platform. Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes, and the discussions were audio-recorded and verbatim transcribed. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) was used to analyze the transcripts. It involved

identifying, organizing, and interpreting recurring themes and patterns in participants' discussions. The analysis aimed to uncover the underlying meanings and perspectives related to DT1 communication effectiveness by asking for concrete examples of successful and unsuccessful advertisements, at least for the selected target audience. Two researchers independently coded the transcripts, then collaboratively developed and refined the themes. NVivo software was used to assist in data management and analysis.

Results and discussion

Analysis of the focus groups revealed several key themes regarding type 1 diabetes (DT1) communication. These themes were organized into four main areas that will be discussed below.

Authenticity in communication

Participants stressed the crucial importance of clear and accessible communication to combat myths and stigmas associated with DT1. As one participant stated, "*Communication is crucial...essential to avoid the spread of false myths and stigma*". This is in line with existing literature that emphasizes the role of communication in chronic disease management (Brown et al., 2020).

Participants expressed the need for campaigns that avoid outdated stereotypes and represent the diversity of the DT1 community. They stressed the importance of directly involving people with DT1 in the creation of messages, thus ensuring authenticity and relevance. This participatory approach is supported by recent studies on the co-creation of health messages (Smith et al., 2023). T1D patients perceive current communication strategies as often lacking authenticity and based on outdated stereotypes.

Social media as community builders

Social media emerged as a key platform for connecting and sharing information. However, participants expressed a preference for indirect communication through other users, rather than direct communication from companies or institutions. One participant said, "*I prefer an indirect role, through other users, rather than direct communication on their profiles*".

Online communities were described as valuable sources of support and a sense of belonging. This finding reflects the growing importance of online communities in supporting people with chronic conditions, as highlighted by Johnson et al. (2024).

Online communities provided valuable support and a sense of belonging, as another participant noted, "the usefulness of connecting with other people who are coping with the same condition."

Patients perceive social media as a crucial platform for information sharing and community building. However, they prefer indirect communication through peers rather than direct corporate messages.

Relationship with pharmaceutical companies

Relations with pharmaceutical companies were described as paradoxical: while acknowledging dependence on their products, participants criticized the lack of adequate support and communication, highlighting the lack of effective institutional campaigns.

Participants stressed the need for greater awareness on the part of institutions and pharmaceutical companies to fill the gaps in understanding of the condition. Campaigns such as Medtronic's Blue Challenge, which uses a blue balloon to symbolize the daily challenges of diabetes, were particularly appreciated for their authenticity.

This finding suggests the need for pharmaceutical companies to be more engaged in communicating and supporting the DT1 community, in line with recent discussions on corporate social responsibility in healthcare (Kim & Hess, 2023).

Emotional involvement in health messages

The emotional aspect in communication was considered crucial. Participants stressed the importance of campaigns that convey empathy and understanding and suggested the use of personal stories and humor to make the message more accessible and engaging. Communication needs to go beyond stereotypes and promote positive messages. Participants stressed the need to challenge stigma and present a positive image of life with type 1 diabetes. One participant urged communication to “fight prejudice and ignorance.” Collaboration with T1D experts was suggested to ensure sensitive and accurate communication strategies. Participants recognized the power of emotional appeal in marketing, particularly in the context of communication about T1D.

Participants stressed the importance of conveying emotions such as courage, confidence, and understanding in T1D communication. They felt that these emotions could resonate with both T1D-affected and unaffected people, fostering a sense of connection and empathy: “I know it's not easy to engage emotionally, it's certainly more difficult than putting all your eggs in one basket on a nice offer, but if you can do that, it makes a difference.”

These findings underscore the importance of authentic representation in health messages, aligning with patient-centered communication theory (Sardesai-Nadkarni & Street, 2023). This suggests that healthcare organizations and pharmaceutical companies should involve T1D patients more directly in message creation and campaign development.

Conclusion

This research aims to fill a gap in the existing literature by providing a patient-centered perspective on diabetes communication and to offer practical guidance for improving the effectiveness of future advertising campaigns in this area.

The emergence of social media as a preferred platform for information sharing and mutual support represents a significant opportunity for healthcare organizations and pharmaceutical companies. However, participants' preference for indirect communication through other users suggests the need for a more subtle and less invasive approach by these entities. Companies and organizations might consider facilitating and supporting online patient communities rather than trying to communicate directly through their own channels. The participants' emphasis on the importance of empathy and emotionality in communication opens new perspectives for future campaigns. Communication strategies that incorporate emotional elements, humor, and personal stories could be more effective in capturing the audience's attention and promoting a deeper understanding of DT1. This approach could also help reduce stigma and normalize the perception of DT1 in society.

Despite the limitations of the study, such as the relatively small sample size and age homogeneity of participants, these results provide a solid basis for rethinking current communication strategies on DT1. Future research could expand this work to include a larger and more diverse sample and incorporate quantitative methods to validate these findings on a larger scale.

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