

# Distrust of Pharmaceutical Companies in the U.S.

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by

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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More than ever, in the wake of the Covid-19 global pandemic, it is useful to consider interactions between technology and society with respect to public health. Pharmaceutical companies develop and sell life-saving medications, so it is of utmost importance that consumers' trust them. However, in 2019 the U.S. pharmaceutical industry ranked as the most poorly regarded industry with 58% of respondents indicating that they held a negative view of big pharma (McCarthy, 2019). Currently, public trust of the pharmaceutical industry is very low. This skepticism is particularly dangerous because it can encourage behaviors that may damage public health, like refusal to vaccinate children. Therefore, it is important to understand how pharmaceutical companies are attempting to regain trust in the eyes of the public. Better understanding the cause of the distrust will enable a refinement of the relationships between the public and participants within the public health sector.

Participants involved include pharmaceutical companies themselves, who claim to be dedicated to serving patients and making medicines affordable (Pfizer, 2020). Closely related, is the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which imposes strict guidelines related to product safety but cannot legally control drug prices (FDA, 2019). Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA), the pharmaceutical companies' trade association, provides guidance to pharmaceutical companies and releases statements on behalf of the industry as a whole (PhRMA, 2018). Advocacies, such as Patients for Affordable Drugs, make efforts to lower the cost of prescription drugs by sharing patient stories (May, 2020). Lastly, consumers of pharmaceutical products distrust the marketed safety of such products and the company incentives (ICWA, n.d.).

The pharmaceutical industry must improve its reputation. The state of public health and future medical innovation is at stake (Pahus et al., 2020). Pharmaceutical companies are

attempting to regain trust by changing the way they advertise, embracing affordable pricing, and highlighting their dedication to putting patients first. Ultimately, this makes the pharmaceutical industry's manifest function, which is a commitment to public health, more salient than its latent function, which is a commitment to profit generation.

## **Review of Research**

Research on industry trust building strategies and the psychology behind them has been extensive. Deegan et al. (2002) investigated the social and environmental disclosures of BHP, an Australian resources company. The researchers found that as the Australian public demonstrated greater interest in the environment, BHP released more environment focused statements. This was deemed attributable to legitimacy theory. Legitimacy theory assumes that a social contract exists between an organization, like a company, and the public, which dictates the nature of such a relationship. Therefore, the company is expected to act within the limits of the contract. If the company fails to do so, they risk losing customer trust and approval. As a result, company public reporting often reflects company desire to justify their actions according to the contract (Shocker and Sethi, 1973; Suchman, 1995; Fouli, 2012).

Arguably, part of the reason distrust in the pharmaceutical industry is so high is due to a breach in the social contract referenced in legitimacy theory. Pharmaceutical companies are supposed to develop medical solutions to improve public health. However, extensive product marketing and scandals surrounding pharmaceutical companies, like the opioid crisis, seem to violate a commitment to public health. Not only have pharmaceutical companies failed to uphold their end of the social contract, they seem to be dedicated to another purpose. This relates to the concept Merton (1957) proposed of manifest versus latent function. It seems that consumers are

suspicious of the pharmaceutical industry's manifest function of providing medical solutions to treat and/or prevent illnesses. Instead, it is believed that pharmaceutical companies' marketing of products may support a latent function of economic gain. This discrepancy between manifest and latent function seems to cause public distrust of pharmaceutical companies.

Another social theory used in industry trust building efforts is appraisal theory. Appraisal theory assumes that emotions are influenced by appraisal, which involves the subjective evaluation of an event or situation (Scherer, 1999). Research into applications of this theory reveals that companies use very different discourse strategies to create a trustworthy identity. For instance, British Petroleum company (BP) uses words related to technical expertise and ability more frequently, while IKEA uses words related to compassion and improvement. Despite using different strategies, they both develop a trustworthy reputation. BP does so by emphasizing its competence, while IKEA does so by emphasizing its commitment to customers (Fouli, 2012).

In the case of pharmaceutical companies, appraisal theory is arguably less useful because this industry has already lost public trust. For instance, Snyder and Stukas (1999) found that people tend to pay greater attention to positive information than negative information when competency is concerned, but vice versa when integrity is concerned. This is likely because examples of company competence give the public confidence that true company ability is adequate. Thus, the public perceives instances of incompetence as not reflecting the company's true abilities because they have evidence that the company can perform better. However, the public interprets negative demonstrations of integrity as reflecting company morals. Therefore, later attempts by companies with integrity failures to reverse this perception, such as using appraisal theory, seem calculated and disingenuous (Kim et al, 2004).

In the case of the pharmaceutical industry, not only is their ability being questioned by the lack of evidence in support of the effectiveness of some drugs, but their integrity is failing as the public perceives them to be putting profits before patients. Thus, Gillespie and Dietz (2009) would argue that a distrust regulation strategy should be used. Such strategies address the flaws that led to the development of distrust without attempting to ignore them. This is found to be specifically effective when companies address the flaws on their own accord (Dirks et al, 2005). The use of distrust regulation strategies in combination with the concept of manifest versus latent function will be applied to investigate how big pharma is attempting to rebuild its reputation.

### **Increasing transparency to enhance integrity**

It has been claimed that competence, benevolence, and integrity are the most important factors to a perception of trustworthiness (Mayer et al., 1995). A key component of integrity is transparency. Pharmaceutical companies spend roughly one-third of their revenue on marketing products (Mulinari, 2016). However, Filipova (2020) found that direct-to-consumer (DTC) advertising could mislead patients and worsen patients' relationships with their physician. Therefore, DTC advertising as it stands, seems to contribute to big pharma's negative reputation by decreasing its trustworthiness. As a result of such heavy advertising, it seems that consumers perceive big pharma as being dedicated to the latent function of profit acquisition rather than the manifest function of serving patient needs. The tendency to perceive big pharma as prioritizing its latent function contributes to distrust of the industry.

In 2018, PhRMA released a memo indicating its commitment to transparency with a statement that DTC advertisements from its member companies "will soon direct patients to information about medicine costs" (PhRMA, 2018). This indicates PhRMA's dedication to

increasing transparency with consumers. Soon after, Eli Lilly became the first pharmaceutical company to have DTC ads direct people towards a pricing information page (Ricks, 2019). The inclusion of direction to product price information in DTC advertisements marks a step towards increasing trustworthiness. In doing so, companies like Eli Lilly have enabled consumers to be better informed about drug products that might be of interest to them, thereby enhancing honest communication between the company and consumers. This decision also lets consumers feel they are being heard. It marks an attempt to fix some of the flaws that led pharmaceutical companies to lose public trust in the first place, like aggressive and deceptive advertising. Therefore, according to Gillespie and Dietz (2009), this would be an appropriate use of a distrust regulation strategy that the public can perceive as an honest attempt to address integrity issues.

Johnson & Johnson went even further by becoming the first pharmaceutical company to include information about pricing in DTC advertisements themselves. After conducting a customer survey about what pricing information would be most helpful, the company vowed to include both the list price of the product before any discounts and the estimated out-of-pocket costs (White, 2019). This decision received attention from many, including the U.S Health and Human Services Secretary, Alex Azar, who said “We commend Johnson & Johnson for recognizing the value of informing consumers about list prices and for doing so voluntarily” (Azar, 2019 qtd Steenhuisen, 2019). The word *voluntarily* indicates that Johnson & Johnson did this on its own accord rather than being forced to. Accordingly, consumers can be more confident that Johnson & Johnson is a company genuinely dedicated to integrity. The high praise from Azar indicates that Johnson & Johnson should be used as a model for companies trying to boost their reputation.

Over prescription of drugs and the perception of it is further evidence of the lack of integrity within the pharmaceutical industry. Survey results indicate that in 2014, 79% of patients who were prescribed opioids for chronic pain were long-term users, which marked an alarming increase from 45% in 2000 (Safer, 2019). Often times opioids lose their effectiveness within a few weeks as a result of tolerance build up. Therefore, they no longer serve their original purpose. Thus, prescribing opioids for long-term use is arguably over prescription. Opioids are not the only drug criticized for being over prescribed. Prescription medications for indigestion, hypothyroidism, and depression are also dangerously over prescribed (Safer, 2019).

While doctors write the physical prescriptions, big pharma is a direct cause of the problem. Companies manufacturing prescription drugs often pay doctors. Doctors who are paid the most by big pharma seem to prescribe drugs made by the drug manufacturer the most. Dr. Andrew Kolodny, head of Physicians for Responsible Opioid Prescribing, described this practice saying, “It smells like doctors being bribed to sell narcotics, and that's very disturbing” (Kessler et al., 2018). Thus, pharmaceutical companies paying doctors for prescribing their drugs likely decreases public trust in big pharma.

One example of the harmful effects over prescription of drugs can have, comes from the case of Angela Cantone. She was prescribed Subsys, an opioid containing fentanyl, for 2.5 years despite the negative side effects she experienced and the concerns she raised about it. Later, it was discovered that the manufacturers of Subsys had paid her doctor, Dr. Thiagarajah, over \$200,000. Therefore, it seems that rather than having the patient's best interest in mind, he had profit in mind. This is a clear example of how pharmaceutical companies play a role in over prescription and how this can contribute to distrust in the healthcare system as a whole (Kessler et al., 2018).

The fact that Dr. Thiyagarajah was being paid so much money by big pharma was exposed through Open Payments. Open Payments is a government database that was developed as a result of a specific section of the Affordable Care Act. The section, known as Physician Payments Sunshine Act, requires medical product manufacturers, like pharmaceutical companies, to disclose payments made to physicians (Patients Protection and Affordable Care Act, 2010). This information is made available to the public on the Open Payments database. The system was designed to enhance transparency in the pharmaceutical industry. It marked an effort to hold big pharma more accountable for its potential effects in the over prescription of medications by making industry transactions with physicians open to the public. However, this act did little to solve the problem. A study in oncology found that the number of doctors receiving industry payments had decreased but value of total payments had increased (Marshall et al., 2019). On the contrary, a study on industry payments to surgeons found that the value of payments to doctors had decreased but number of payments had not (Rhee et al., 2020).

Thus, more needs to be done to hold big pharma accountable. In 2017, California committed to doing so by approving legislation that prevents big pharma from giving gifts to doctors. The law, “severely restricts pharmaceutical companies from providing flights, travel, speaking fees, consulting payments, entertainment or other economic benefits to health care providers” (California Senate District Two, 2017). This represents a direct regulation on pharmaceutical industry payments to doctors. Therefore, it holds them directly accountable for the impact their payments may have on over prescription. This marks a key step towards increasing trust of the pharmaceutical industry. It better ensures that money is not going towards increasing profit by paying doctors for prescribing their drugs, but rather towards the protection of patients with the development of new medications.



## **Committing to more affordable pricing to improve competence**

Merely being more transparent about their drug prices is not enough to save the reputation of big pharma companies. Patients are concerned about the overwhelmingly high cost of drugs. Pharmaceutical companies argue that such high prices are necessary because medical innovation is expensive. However, this claim seems to be a bit unfounded for large companies. Dr. Craig Garthwaite, a researcher in the health services field, reported, “When the biopharma industry says that any change to drug pricing is going to destroy the innovation engine, that’s not really true” (Patients for Affordable Drugs, 2021). Instead, he and others believe the exorbitant drug prices are a result of big pharma’s desire for profit.

High drug prices are evidence of incompetence within the pharmaceutical industry. Patients for Affordable Drugs argues that “the most innovative drug in the world is worthless if it is not affordable and accessible” (Patients for Affordable Drugs, 2021). This indicates that the value of new drugs and the ‘innovation’ the pharmaceutical industry is allegedly attempting to protect with high product prices, is insignificant if the public cannot readily afford to use such products. Likewise, high drug prices contradict big pharma’s manifest function of improving patient lives because they prevent patients from being able to afford necessary medications. Cost currently represents a huge barrier to access of prescription medications which seems to indicate that big pharma is more motivated by the desire for profit than serving patients.

To address this issue, a number of pharmaceutical companies have committed to alternative payment models. PhRMA has committed to payment reforms that put patients and quality first while also striving to contain prescription medication cost. One such alternative payment model, is pay-for-performance (PhRMA, 2015). With a pay-for-performance contract, the price of the drug product is directly related to its medical outcomes. For instance, Merck

signed a deal with the insurance company Cigna that will provide discounts on its anti-diabetes drugs (Januvia and Janumet). At the end of each year, Cigna is able to view lab results for patients taking these drugs to see if their blood sugar levels have lowered. If they have, Merck will increase discounts offered on their anti-diabetes drugs. Moreover, Cigna will be able to track if patients are taking medications as the physicians prescribed. If Cigna finds that they are, Merck will offer further discounts. Traditionally, big pharma only provides discounts to insurance companies based on how frequently the drug is used. However, this switch to a pay-for-performance model, indicates a dedication to public health as discounts are offered on the basis of benefit to patients. It is also an effort to make effective medication more accessible (Bordonaro, 2009). Other pharmaceutical companies, like Amgen and Eli Lilly, have made similar pay-for-performance commitments on some of their most popular products (Pharmaceutical Technology, 2017). Pay-for-performance models allow for the manifest function of pharmaceutical companies to be more salient in the eyes of the public.

Similarly, the FDA came out with a Drug Competition Action Plan in 2017 designed to help big pharma commit to lowering the cost of prescription drugs. As a first step, the FDA published a list of all drugs that currently had no patent protection and no generic option. The FDA committed to expediting the review process for generic drugs so they can get to market quicker (FDA, 2020). This combination of actions represents the FDA's commitment to promoting competition within the pharmaceutical industry, which will thereby lower the cost of prescription drugs and increase access to healthcare.

This commitment extends to the closely related industry of biotechnology with the production of biologics. Biologics are a specific type of drug that comes from natural sources, like cells. Companies producing biologics often receive the same critics as more traditional

pharmaceutical companies as they still face issues with product cost. Thus, the FDA has likewise encouraged competition with regards to the production of biologics by committing to expediting the approval of biosimilars, the generic version of biologics. An Amgen report on recent biosimilar trends indicates that “the rate of growth in FDA biosimilar approvals is showing a clear and positive trend in recent years, ranging from only one approval in 2015 to 10 approvals in 2019” (Amgen, 2020). This indicates that both the FDA and the biotechnology industry have committed to increasing competition within the field.

Biotechnology companies have started developing biosimilars for top grossing biologics nationwide. For instance, AbbVie’s anti-inflammatory drug, Humira, is the top grossing biologic in the U.S. With the FDA’s support of biosimilars, many companies, like Amgen and Mylan, have developed approved biosimilars for Humira (Amgen, 2018; Mylan, 2018; Joachim, 2020). The introduction of multiple new product equivalents to Humira will help increase competition for this top selling biologic and thus hopefully decrease the price. Moreover, the fact that companies like Amgen have shown their dedication to the development of biosimilars, helps to convey their commitment to improving issues that exist within the pharmaceutical and biotechnology industry. The fact that they are doing something to help the problem, helps to increase the public perception of their trustworthiness.

### **Putting patients first to increase perception of benevolence**

Benevolence is another important aspect of trust (Mayers et al., 1995). In the past few decades, the pharmaceutical industry has struggled with benevolence. The opioid crisis, which began in the 1990s, was marked by pharmaceutical companies aggressively marketing their products. The push for opioid products led to a dramatic increase in opioid prescription rates,

peaking at a rate of 81.3 prescriptions per 100 people (CDC, 2020). The addictive nature inherent to opioids caused many who were prescribed them to abuse them, resulting in widespread addiction and death due to overdose. In just 20 years, this crisis has claimed the lives of over 400,000 Americans (Marks, 2017). Many pharmaceutical companies selling opioids, like Purdue Pharma, knew their products were potentially addictive yet aggressively pushed them. Consequently, big pharma is culpable for this epidemic in the eyes of the majority. This is supported by results of an NPR study indicating that 57% of Americans believed big pharma should be held responsible for worsening the opioid epidemic (DeWeerd, 2019; Mann, 2019).

Arguably, the opioid crisis reflects poorly on big pharma because the impact of opioids seems contradictory to a desire to improve public health. The way opioids are referenced in the media, with headlines highlighting the harm and over prescription of these drugs, conveys that the benefits of opioids are negligible compared to the negatives (Carroll, 2018; Frakt, 2020). Consequently, media reports portray opioids as causing problems rather than fixing them. This highlights the discrepancy between the manifest and latent function of pharmaceutical companies, seemingly favoring the latent function of profit as the driving force of the pharmaceutical industry.

The reputation of big pharma can be saved by shifting focus to ways in which it is dedicated to serving patients. In 1982, 7 people were killed from taking Tylenol laced with cyanide. At the time, Tylenol was one of Johnson & Johnson's most popular products. Upon learning about the incident, the media highlighted the deaths, writing statements like, "Paula Prince...was found dead..., an open bottle of Extra-Strength Tylenol nearby" (Tiff, 1982 qtd Latson, 2014). Such statements made Johnson & Johnson look culpable for the incident. The company responded by ordering a total recall of Tylenol nationwide and designing a new

container that would prevent tampering. Consequently, Tylenol sales recovered completely and Johnson & Johnson grew its company substantially (Horsley, 2019). Despite being very costly, the company made the decision to put patients over profit. Accordingly, it gained the trust of the public who now had evidence that Johnson & Johnson was committed to the manifest function of improving patient lives. The handling of this incident likely led the public to perceive Johnson & Johnson as being benevolent, as it revealed the company was committed to doing what is right.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, pharmaceutical companies are presented with an opportunity to improve their reputation in a similar way to the Johnson & Johnson case of 1982. The pandemic has impacted the way Americans live their daily lives, changing the way people learn, socialize, and work. It has also presented a serious strain on the nation's public health. Pharmaceutical companies are and will continue to play a crucial role in controlling this disease, which has claimed the lives of over 503,000 people (New York Times, 2021). Data from a recent Harris Poll indicated that 40% of respondents had a more positive view of the pharmaceutical industry following the Pfizer announcement of an effective vaccine (Harris Poll, 2021). This could be attributed to the media increasingly portraying pharmaceutical companies as contributing to an improvement in public health. Thus, the manifest function of pharmaceutical companies, a dedication to serving patients, is being highlighted leading to a more positive perception of big pharma. Consequently, this will likely increase the perceived trustworthiness of the pharmaceutical industry.

## **Conclusion**

For pharmaceutical companies, increasing the salience of positive qualities, like integrity, competence, and benevolence, seem key to rebuilding trust within industry. However, in doing

so it is important that companies address critiques voiced by the public. Thus, not only is the unwritten social contract that exists between companies and the public upheld, but greater emphasis is placed on the manifest function of the company rather than its latent function. While this paper focused specifically on how a recommitment to these values has been used by the pharmaceutical industry to regain public trust, this idea extends to other industries. It would be interesting to see if other industries commonly perceived as negative, like the oil and gas industry, are using similar strategies to maintain public trust and approval, or if they employ unique strategies which may also be applicable to the pharmaceutical industry. Regardless, the public will not accept company claims naively. Thus, companies must find a genuine way to reclaim public trust.

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