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ANALYSIS OF THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS ON THE FORMATION OF CONSUMER LOYALTY TO PHARMACEUTICAL BRANDS

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Introduction. The digital transformation has fundamentally altered how consumers seek information and make decisions, positioning social networks as critical communication channels across all sectors. For the pharmaceutical industry, a domain traditionally constrained by stringent regulatory oversight and reliance on professional healthcare provider (HCP) outreach, this shift presents both immense opportunities and significant challenges. As patients increasingly turn to platforms like Facebook, X, and specialized online communities to research health conditions, medications, and product reviews, the direct and indirect influence of social media on consumer loyalty to pharmaceutical brands can no longer be ignored. Unlike consumer-packaged goods (CPG) or fashion, where loyalty is often driven by aesthetic appeal or price, pharmaceutical loyalty is intrinsically tied to trust, efficacy, and perceived safety, making the digital communication strategy a delicate but powerful instrument for long-term brand equity.

Aim. The aim of the work is to thoroughly investigate the core mechanisms and influencing factors through which social networks contribute to the formation and reinforcement of consumer loyalty towards pharmaceutical brands, while also identifying the unique regulatory and ethical constraints that define and often limit the industry's digital engagement strategies.

Methods. This study employed a comprehensive research methodology, beginning with an extensive literature review and synthesis of recent academic studies, white papers, and industry reports focusing on digital marketing in healthcare, patient behavior, and e-WOM within health-related communities. This was followed by a conceptual analysis of established marketing principles such as content marketing, community building, and transparency as they are specifically adapted and applied within the highly regulated pharmaceutical environment. Finally, a systemic approach was utilized to evaluate how social network activities impact the fundamental drivers of brand loyalty: trust, perceived value, and emotional attachment to the pharmaceutical company and its products.

Results. The analysis confirmed that social networks exert a substantial, albeit nuanced and often indirect, influence on pharmaceutical brand loyalty, operating primarily through three distinct channels. Firstly, the most crucial impact is achieved through the reinforcement of trust via educational content. Given the life-critical nature of pharmaceutical products, brands that consistently publish accurate, science-backed, and relevant educational content about diseases, prevention, and proper product usage effectively position themselves as authoritative and reliable sources. This strategic provision of high-value information builds consumer confidence, directly translating into foundational brand trust, which is the bedrock of loyalty in the health sector.

Secondly, social media excels at facilitating e-WOM and fostering online communities. User-Generated Content (UGC), particularly genuine testimonials and

positive experiences shared by real patients or caregivers, carries immense weight, often perceived as more credible than branded advertising, thereby significantly boosting loyalty among prospective consumers. By actively managing and supporting these brand communities, pharmaceutical companies help to create a collective identity and sense of mutual support among users, deepening the emotional connection and attachment to the brand that supplies the product.

Thirdly, social platforms enable the humanization and demonstration of brand transparency. By highlighting Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, patient support programs, ethical practices, and by maintaining a responsive (while compliant) presence in comments and direct messages, pharmaceutical brands can shed their often-impersonal corporate image. This approach cultivates an emotional bond with the consumer, demonstrating genuine care and commitment beyond sales, which is vital for securing long-term, sustained loyalty.

However, the efficacy of these social media strategies is heavily moderated by significant industry-specific limitations. These include stringent regulatory oversight that mandates detailed disclosure of indications and side effects, severely restricting the spontaneity and creative freedom typical of other sectors. Furthermore, the high ethical responsibility necessitates careful management of patient data and the urgent combating of health-related misinformation, which poses a direct threat to patient safety and brand reputation. The need for precise targeting of HCPs for ethical communication also often redirects marketing efforts away from the general consumer audience.

Conclusions. In conclusion, the influence of social networks on pharmaceutical consumer loyalty is robust, yet highly dependent on a strategy rooted in compliance and integrity. Loyalty is not built through aggressive promotion, but rather indirectly secured by consistently building and maintaining deep trust through credible educational content, fostering genuine emotional connections via brand transparency and meaningful CSR, and actively supporting strong online communities where positive e-WOM can flourish. The most successful pharmaceutical brands in the digital age are those that master the delicate balance between active, engaging communication and strict adherence to the critical ethical and regulatory standards that govern the industry.