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The Willingness, Involvement, Beliefs, and Barriers of Community Pharmacy Professionals to Offer Pharmaceutical Marketing Strategies

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Abstract

Background: Marketing is an essential attribute for pharmacists' effectiveness in promoting better health in communities, as it creates a critical awareness among stakeholders, including government policy makers, private practitioners in community pharmacy, universities and colleges offering pharmacy education, and the wider community, regarding the products and services available in community pharmacies.

The purpose of the current study was to investigate the willingness, involvement, beliefs, and barriers faced by pharmacy professionals in Saudi Arabia in their efforts to implement various pharmaceutical marketing strategies aimed at enhancing product and service awareness in pharmacies.

Methods: A cross-sectional study involving a total of 200 pharmacy professionals from different regions of Saudi Arabia was carried out between March 1st and October 7, 2024.

Results: Most of the participants (52.0%, $n = 104$) were male, and between the ages of 30-39 (84.5%, $n = 169$). Findings showed a strong willingness and deep involvement of pharmacy professionals in offering pharmaceutical strategies. Over 85% ($n = 170$) of the participants indicated a strong belief in the positive impact of effective pharmaceutical marketing strategies on better health outcomes. Similarly, over 87% ($n = 175$) of the participants identified several significant barriers to the effective implementation of pharmaceutical marketing strategies, including insufficient profitability, inadequate training, a lack of reimbursement from employers and consumers, insufficient management support, and the lack of established standards to guide the framework for these strategies.

Conclusions: In conclusion, it is essential that relevant stakeholders, including government healthcare agencies and pharmacy management nationwide, to take proactive steps to address and resolve the identified obstacles and enhance health outcomes by facilitating the effective implementation of pharmaceutical marketing strategies by pharmacy professionals.

Keywords:

Pharmaceutical marketing, pharmacy professionals, marketing barriers, willingness, beliefs, pharmaceutical industry

Introduction

Pharmaceutical marketing plays an important role in shaping the healthcare environment, including promoting better service delivery from community pharmacies [1-2]. As frontline healthcare providers, the professional positions and advantages that marketing pharmacy professionals have in influencing health outcomes are unparalleled. They participate in, among other activities, providing recommendations and promotional effort on pharmaceutical products and services within the industry as well as to the wider public [3-6]. Despite the significant importance of pharmacy professionals utilizing diverse pharmaceutical marketing strategies, there is scarcity of research directed towards exploring the willingness and ability of these professionals to offer and engage in such efforts. Research which enhances comprehension of the pharmacy professionals' willingness, engagement, beliefs, and perceived barriers is critical to the design of marketing campaigns that align with professional ethics and standards of quality patient care. The current study aimed to address and fill this gap.

Over the last decade, the health system has vigorously promoted integrated care models, emphasizing the importance of coordination across a diverse range of healthcare professionals [7-8]. Community pharmacists have increasingly been recognized for potential contributions to patient care and public health initiatives [9-11]. However, the extent of their actual engagement in offering pharmaceutical marketing activities is not an area to which researchers have paid much attention. Previous research has identified factors that may affect pharmacy professionals' success in promoting positive health outcomes, including professional education, personal beliefs concerning marketing ethics, and external pressures from the healthcare systems [12-15].

The perspectives of community pharmacy professionals regarding pharmaceutical marketing are unquestionably essential [16-19]. While some view marketing as an essential tool for the improvement of patient access to drugs and health-related information, others might perceive it as a potential conflict of interest that threatens to undermine their role as trustworthy healthcare professionals [20-23]. That contrast highlights the necessity of research that investigates the perceptions and attitudes of pharmacy professionals in regard to marketing strategies. An examination of the barriers to effective pharmaceutical marketing in community pharmacies is crucial, as these challenges may be complex and hinder the efficient delivery of services and products in pharmacies, ultimately affecting community health outcomes. Factors such as regulatory limitations, inadequate resources, insufficient training opportunities, and apprehensions regarding the suitability of marketing strategies have been pointed out as core challenges in other areas, but it is not clear whether these present as equally challenging factors to pharmacy professionals in Saudi Arabia when looking to attain success in offering different marketing strategies [24-27]. Thus, recognizing and understanding these challenges within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) healthcare framework and goals as outlined in Vision 2030 is vital for the development of interventions aimed at improving the ability of pharmacy professionals to participate in ethical and efficient marketing practices.

This cross-sectional study sought to investigate the willingness, involvement, beliefs, and barriers faced by community pharmacy professionals in Saudi Arabia in offering pharmaceutical marketing strategies. The present study aimed to provide evidence through quantitative information obtained from surveys of pharmacy professionals in the KSA regarding the state of pharmaceutical marketing in community pharmacies. The objective is for the findings to be significantly beneficial in understanding the factors that influence professionals' involvement in marketing within community pharmacies and in informing the development of strategies which will enhance pharmaceutical marketing efforts. With little previous research having been directly focused on this topic, the current study is necessary to narrow the gap between practice and marketing in the pharmaceutical industry by explaining some of the ambiguities related to the engagement of community pharmacy professionals in marketing activities.

Methods

Setting, Design, and Timeframe of the Study

A cross-sectional study was conducted among community pharmacy professionals across all regions in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The study was carried out between March 1, 2024, and October 7, 2024, with the goal of exploring the willingness, involvement, beliefs, and barriers that community pharmacy professionals encounter when offering pharmaceutical marketing strategies. Ethical approval to conduct the study was granted by the Institutional Review Board of Taif University.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

All licensed community pharmacy professionals currently practicing in the KSA who, after being fully informed of the purpose and their role in this study, granted informed consent and volunteered to participate in this study, were included. Professionals who did not consent to participate for whatever reason or who were not actively engaged in community pharmacy practice during the period of this study were excluded. Importantly, actively participating participants here means that these were pharmacist, who at the time of the data collection, were involving in delivering of some type of community pharmacy service. Accordingly, retired or pharmacists with their licenses revoked were not included in the study.

Sample and Population

The target population for this study was comprised of community pharmacy professionals, including pharmacists, pharmacy technicians, and other relevant staff involved in pharmacy practice across the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. A convenience sampling method was employed, resulting in a sample size of 200 participants who volunteered to complete the survey.

Ethical Approval

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Taif University. Before completing the survey, all participants were required to read and sign a consent form verifying their willingness to participate.

Study Variables

The dependent variables studied in this research included participants' willingness, involvement, beliefs, and perceived barriers in offering pharmaceutical marketing strategies. Independent variables included socio-demographic characteristics such as age, gender, years of practice, experience, job satisfaction levels, type of contract, qualifications, work environment, and others.

Data Collection

A carefully developed questionnaire of 33 items which were a mix of likert, scaled, and yes/no type of questions, was designed to obtain information on the willingness, involvement, beliefs, and perceived barriers among pharmacy professionals regarding the implementation of pharmaceutical marketing strategies in Saudi Arabia (see separately attached Survey Tool). This was framed based upon previous studies and existing literature to identify appropriate items for inclusion in this study. The items fell into four clear categories: demographic information, willingness to engage in marketing strategies, perceptions of involvement, beliefs, and perceived barriers to around offering pharmaceutical marketing strategies among pharmacy professionals in Saudi Arabia. The questionnaire was reviewed and checked for content validity and clarity by two experts in the fields of pharmacy practice and marketing, and a pilot test was administered to 10 community pharmacy professionals to assess the relevance of questions and the time required to complete the survey. The 10 pharmacists involved in the pilot test were randomly chosen from across all regions of Saudi Arabia and from different pharmacy services to ensure that they were a representative pilot group of the targeted study sample and by extension the study population. Following this pilot test, a self-administered questionnaire was used for the volunteer participants, with a final sample of 200 professionals.

Quality Assurance and Data Analysis

The reliability of the data was measured by applying the Cronach's alpha coefficient, with a value of 0.83 from the survey data confirming high reliability of the questionnaire and ultimately the data collected for this study. The data collected were organized in a structured way, checked for completeness and inaccuracies, and subsequently coded for analysis. For statistical analysis, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences-SPSS version 26 was used. Descriptive statistics including percentages, proportions, and frequencies, were carried out to summarize the participants' willingness, involvement, beliefs, and perceived barriers regarding the implementation of pharmaceutical marketing strategies within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Results

Upon distributing the survey to the target study population of all professionals in the pharmacy sector across different regions of KSA, a total of 200 of the target participants completed the survey. The majority of the participants (52.0%, $n = 104$) were aged between 30 and 39 years. Among them, the largest proportion (84.5%, $n = 169$) were male. Other important demographic traits of the participants included their nationality, marital status, work location, and educational qualification. The summary of these descriptive are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 *Willingness and Involvement in Offering Pharmaceutical Marketing Strategies*

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF THE PARTICIPANTS		
Descriptive Characteristic	Frequency	Proportion (%)
AGE		
21-29	73	35.6
30-39 years	104	52.0
40-49 years	18	9.0
50-59 years	4	2.0
>60	1	0.5
GENDER		
Female	31	15.5
Male	169	84.5
NATIONALITY		
Saudi	71	35.5
Non-Saudi	129	64.5
LOCATION OF WORK		
In a city	168	84.0
In a village	32	16.0
REGION OF PRACTICE		
Central region	25	12.5
Eastern region	51	25.5
Northern region	25	12.5
Southern region	54	27.0
Western region	45	22.0
HIGHEST EDUCATION QUALIFICATION		
Diploma	1	0.5
Bachelors	166	83.0
Master	2	1.0
Pharm. D	31	15.5

A mix of factors indicates a significant level of willingness and involvement of community pharmacy professionals in offering pharmaceutical strategies for enhanced better community services provision. The primary factors indicating this willingness and involvement include a high level of satisfaction in pharmaceutical marketing careers, engaging in different types of community pharmacy practices, practicing at different levels, participating in various types of contracts, and demonstrated varying levels of experience in their practice. In regard to the level of satisfaction, approximately 65% of the participants were either satisfied or very satisfied with their practice in their career in pharmaceutical marketing (Table 2).

Table 2 Satisfaction in Career

	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
Dissatisfied	21	10.5 %	10.5 %
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (neutral)	46	23.0 %	33.5 %
Satisfied	80	40.0 %	73.5 %
Very dissatisfied	4	2.0 %	75.5 %
Very satisfied	49	24.5 %	100.0 %

A total of 99.0% of the participants were affiliated with chain pharmacies, while the remainder were associated with independent pharmacies. A total of 95.0% ($n = 190$) reported full-time employment, while 4.5% were on part-time contracts, and just 0.5% were engaged on a temporary contract basis in their pharmaceutical marketing careers. Participants reported diverse levels of experience in pharmaceutical marketing activities, with the majority possessing over 10 years of experience (Table 3).

Table 3: Years of Experience in Community Pharmacy

Age bracket (Years)	n	%
Less than 2	46	23.00
2-5	48	24.00
6-10	34	17.00
Over 10	72	36.00

In relation to the provisions of the Saudi Commission for Health Specialties, a majority of the participants (77.5%, $n = 155$) were at the pharmacist level, with the rest being either senior pharmacists (18.5%, $n = 37$) or consultant pharmacists (4.0%, $n = 8$).

Beliefs among Community Pharmacists in Offering Pharmaceutical Marketing Strategies

Participants held strong beliefs regarding the various areas from which data were collected to evaluate this perspective in this study. In all six counts (i.e., belief that awareness of pharmaceutical marketing strategies has a positive impact on health outcomes; belief that awareness of pharmaceutical marketing strategies has a positive impact on health outcomes; belief that awareness of pharmaceutical marketing strategies enhances the quality of life of the community; belief that

awareness of pharmaceutical marketing strategies bring about economic gains for the community [clients]; belief in that pharmaceutical marketing strategies can bring about positive economic outcomes to the community; belief that community pharmacy professionals have the knowledge and skills to provide pharmaceutical marketing strategies, and belief in own willingness to deliver pharmaceutical marketing strategies to community), it emerged that over 85% of all participants (see Table 4) perceived these as strong areas which can have an overall positive impact in their offering of pharmaceutical marketing strategies to better provide community service delivery and, ultimately, better community health outcomes.

Table 4: Beliefs Among Community Pharmacists in Offering Pharmaceutical Marketing Strategies

Belief that Awareness of Pharmaceutical Marketing Strategies has a positive impact on health outcomes	Belief that Awareness of Pharmaceutical Marketing Strategies has a positive impact on health outcomes	Belief that Awareness of Pharmaceutical Marketing Strategies has a positive enhances quality of life of the community	Belief that Awareness of Pharmaceutical Marketing Strategies bring about economic gains for the community (clients)	Belief in that Pharmaceutical Marketing Strategies can bring about positive economic outcomes to the community	Belief that community pharmacy professionals have the knowledge and skills to provide Pharmaceutical Marketing strategies	Belief in own willingness to deliver Pharmaceutical Marketing Strategies to community
Extremely influential	62 (31.0%)	58(29.0 %)	56(28.0 %)	63(31.5 %)	59(29.5 %)	51(25.5 %)
Very influential	55(27.5 %)	57(28.5 %)	59(29.5 %)	50(25.0 %)	53 (26.5%)	52(26.0 %)
Somewhat influential	59 (29.5%)	60 (30.0%)	63(31.5 %)	63(31.5 %)	64 (32.0%)	66(33.0 %)
Slightly Influential	21 (10.5%)	22(11.0 %)	18(9.0%)	22(11.0 %)	19(9.5%)	24(12.0 %)
Not at all influential	3(1.5%)	3(1.5%)	4(2.0%)	2(1.0%)	5(2.5%)	7(3.5%)

Perceived Barriers among Community Pharmacists in Offering Pharmaceutical Marketing Strategies

It emerged that a lack of profitability, a lack of reimbursement from employers or consumers, insufficient management support, and a lack of standardization for guiding the delivery of pharmaceutical marketing strategies were major barriers to community pharmacy professionals across the KSA. Approximately 87% of the participants ($n = 174$) indicated that a lack of profitability was a stiff barrier among community pharmacy professionals toward offering pharmaceutical marketing strategies effectively, with another equal proportion indicating a lack of reimbursement from either employers or consumers was a major barrier. Similarly, a lack of training, a lack of sufficient support from management, and a lack of a standard guide for the delivery of these services were supported as barriers by over 85% ($n = 170$) of the participants (Table 5).

Table 5: Perceived Barriers among community pharmacists in offering Pharmaceutical Marketing Strategies

	Lack of Profitability	Lack of reimbursement from employers or consumers	Lack of Time	Lack of training	Insufficient Management Support	Absence of standard guidelines for the service
Extremely a barrier	80(40.0%)	84(42.0%)	77(38.5%)	86(43.0%)	83(41.5%)	87(43.5%)
Very a barrier	33(16.5%)	31(15.5%)	37(18.5%)	37(18.5%)	34(17.0%)	33(16.5%)
Somewhat a barrier	60(30.0%)	61(30.5%)	60(30.0%)	56(28.0%)	59(29.5%)	51(25.5%)
Slightly a barrier	20(10.0%)	21(10.5%)	22(11.0%)	19(9.5%)	18(9.0%)	25(12.5%)
Not at all a barrier	7(3.5%)	3(1.5%)	4(2.0%)	2(1.0%)	6(3.0%)	4(2.0%)

Among the participants, it emerged that despite these barriers, over 77% ($n = 155$) were interested in pursuing advanced education in pharmaceutical marketing with majority among them (43.5%, $n = 87$) indicating they would prefer online learning environment as opposed to hybrid setting (28.5%, $n = 57$) or face-to-face learning environment (28.0%, $n = 56$).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand the willingness, involvement, beliefs, and barriers of community pharmacy professionals to offer pharmaceutical marketing strategies across the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Approximately 65% of the participants indicated a strong willingness to offer pharmaceutical marketing strategies across the Kingdom, a finding that was well in agreement with 2021 study findings by Butt et al., who sought to quantify satisfaction levels among pharmacy professionals working in sales or marketing departments in Pakistan's pharmacies [28]. The researchers found high satisfaction levels among marketing pharmacists, individuals who engage in various marketing activities within the community pharmacy field, towards executing their duties in marketing and sales, despite notable low satisfaction in areas such as their remuneration rates. The pharmacists' elevated willingness levels is a pivotal element toward enhancing community pharmacy as it reflects their dedication to equipping the broader community with knowledge regarding the best products and services available within community pharmacies in the Kingdom. The majority of the participants also possess substantial experience in their respective community pharmacy specializations, with many of them employed in full-time contracts, thereby reinforcing their commitment to implementing pharmaceutical marketing strategies across the Kingdom.

The identified high level of commitment to actively participate in pharmaceutical marketing strategies appears to stem from pharmacists' conviction in the impact that these strategies can have on the community. In the existing literature, many previous studies have indicated a strong belief from among community pharmacists regarding the importance of community pharmacy in promoting better health outcomes. Investigating attitudes, perceptions, and barriers of community pharmacists in Rwanda towards health promotion, Nsengimana et al. found that a strong majority (98.7%) of the 236 pharmacy professionals who participated in the study felt that the community pharmacy has an important role in promoting positive health outcomes within the wider community [27]. Consequently, these participants showed a strong highly willingness to positively engage in any endeavor which could yield positive health outcomes that they endorsed.

In a similar study, Thompson et al. reviewed studies related to effects of community pharmacy-delivered public health interventions on population health and health inequalities [29]. The authors found robust evidence supporting the belief among community pharmacists regarding their positive role in promoting better health outcomes. The findings of the current study, consistent with existing literature details, showed a strong perception among community pharmacist that their full engagement in implementing pharmaceutical marketing strategies can significantly benefit the larger public across the Kingdom. As indicated in the results, over 85% of the participants believed that the offering of pharmaceutical marketing strategies can positively impact community health outcomes, enhance the quality of life of the community, and bring about economic gains and overall economic outcomes to the community. Furthermore, pharmacists within the Kingdom felt that community pharmacy professionals possess the knowledge and

skills to implement pharmaceutical marketing strategies aimed at promoting better and economic health outcomes and demonstrated strong commitment to deliver pharmaceutical marketing strategies to community.

The global healthcare sector, including community pharmacy, faces a myriad of challenges that impede effective health services provision [12, 30]. Lack of sufficient resources, limited budget allocations, and training gaps, as well as limited professionals in healthcare, have consistently been shown as major challenges when exploring different topics in healthcare and community pharmacy [30]. The current study supports existing literature findings, revealing that while there is an overall great interest to pursue further education in pharmaceutical marketing in this area especially within the online learning environment, pharmacy professionals looking to promote better healthcare outcomes through enhanced service delivery face significant barriers, including unprofitability, insufficient training, inadequate management support, absence of standardized guidelines for service delivery, and a lack of reimbursement from employers and consumers. The fundamental objective of improving health outcomes through pharmaceutical marketing strategies by pharmacy professionals also has a business aspect, suggesting that successful services delivery should yield financial benefits for pharmacies. Many of the participants in the current study indicated that this extended goal of profitability is never fully attained, making the implementation of pharmaceutical marketing strategies a substantial challenge to overcome.

Training is an integral element for success in any professional endeavor, and it is unsurprising that inadequate training can result in poor career outcomes. The participants in this study strongly indicated that a lack of training was a major barrier to their successful implementation of pharmaceutical marketing strategies. Inefficient managerial support and a lack of standardization are major obstacles for pharmacy professionals in KSA who seek to achieve effective implementation of marketing strategies. Prior research indicates that pharmacy management may prioritize economic benefits derived from invested resources, which could explain their difficulty in supporting pharmacy professionals' implementation of pharmaceutical marketing strategies nationally [31]. A significant impediment is the absence of reimbursement from employers or consumers, which diminishes the economic benefit from pharmacy professionals engaged in offering pharmaceutical marketing strategies. Standardization serves as an important framework for promoting uniformity in the delivery of services in different areas, pharmacy included. The lack of national guidelines and standards to direct the implementation of pharmaceutical marketing strategies emerged as a significant impediment among the participants. In the absence of standardization, many parties are likely to adhere to their internal guidelines, resulting in the challenge of determining when expectations have been met. The absence of standard marketing strategies poses a risk as each pharmacy professional may advocate for what they see as the best strategies. This divergence can lead to confusion within the larger community, as patients may receive varying recommendations from different pharmacists, thereby hindering the pharmacists' ability to understand the most effective strategies to implement.

Conclusion and Recommendation for future research

Marketing is increasingly becoming an important factor for pharmacists' effectiveness in promoting better health in communities as it creates a necessary awareness among stakeholders regarding the products and services available in community pharmacies. Efforts to implement various pharmaceutical marketing strategies for enhancing product and services awareness is an essential objective that warrants thorough comprehension from the perspectives of the willingness, involvement, beliefs, and barriers among core stakeholders, namely pharmacy professionals. This study shows that there is a steadfast willingness and a high level of involvement among pharmacy professionals in promoting products and services via various pharmaceutical marketing strategies. Pharmacy professionals possess a strong belief regarding their availability to be at the forefront of pharmaceutical marketing initiatives. Nevertheless, significant barriers impede pharmacy professionals in achieving this important pharmacy function. These challenges include insufficient profitability, inadequate training, a lack of reimbursement from employers and consumers, insufficient management support, and inadequate standards to guide the framework for implementing such initiatives. Consequently, it is imperative for relevant stakeholders to address these identified challenges in order to enable pharmacy professionals to focus their energy on implementing marketing strategies. It is important to note this study did not engage in the inferential analysis of how various variables influence one another in impacting willingness, involvement, beliefs, and barriers of community pharmacy professionals to offer pharmaceutical marketing strategies. Accordingly, future research could collect data that is more focused for the inferential analysis to help stakeholders and the wider community at large understand and appreciate the way different variables influence one another and ultimately their impact on the willingness, involvement, beliefs, and barriers of community pharmacy professionals to offer pharmaceutical marketing strategies.

Declarations

Ethical Approval: Ethical approval to conduct the research was issued from Taif University. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

Author Contributions: The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

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