IARJSET ISSN (O) 2393-8021, ISSN (P) 2394-1588

International Advanced Research Journal in Science, Engineering and Technology

Impact Factor 8.311 ⁜ Peer-reviewed & Refereed journal ⁜ Vol. 13, Issue 11, November 2026

The Dark Side of Digital Pharma Marketing: Privacy, Surveillance and Ethical Boundaries in Doctor Targeting

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Abstract: The digital transformation of pharmaceutical marketing has fundamentally altered how pharmaceutical companies communicate with healthcare professionals, particularly physicians. Traditional methods of pharmaceutical promotion, such as face-to-face detailing, sponsored conferences and printed promotional materials, are increasingly complemented by electronic detailing, targeted emails, professional networking platforms, mobile applications, programmatic advertising and artificial intelligence-driven engagement strategies. Although these developments offer opportunities for efficient communication and improved access to medical information, they also introduce significant concerns regarding physician privacy, commercial surveillance, behavioural profiling and professional autonomy. This paper critically examines the ethical implications of digitally mediated pharmaceutical marketing, with particular attention to the collection, analysis and commercial exploitation of physicians' professional and behavioural data. Drawing upon surveillance capitalism, contextual integrity, stakeholder theory and medical professionalism, the study develops an integrated conceptual framework explaining how digital targeting practices may transform the relationship between pharmaceutical companies and healthcare professionals. A qualitative conceptual research design is adopted, involving a critical synthesis of scholarly literature, regulatory developments and relevant policy debates published between 2010 and 2025. The analysis identifies five interconnected ethical concerns: inadequate transparency in data collection, limited physician control over personal and professional information, algorithmic manipulation of promotional exposure, conflicts between commercial objectives and clinical independence, and regulatory fragmentation. The paper argues that the central ethical challenge extends beyond data confidentiality to the broader commercial governance of professional behaviour. It proposes a physician-centred framework based on informed data governance, purpose limitation, algorithmic accountability, meaningful consent and independent regulatory oversight. The study contributes to pharmaceutical marketing scholarship by positioning physician targeting as a form of commercial surveillance requiring attention from public health regulators, professional associations and digital governance institutions.

Keywords: Digital pharmaceutical marketing; physician surveillance; data privacy; algorithmic targeting; medical professionalism; pharmaceutical ethics; digital governance.

I. INTRODUCTION

Digitalisation has become an important structural feature of contemporary pharmaceutical marketing. Pharmaceutical companies increasingly employ technology-enabled communication systems to establish relationships with healthcare professionals, promote medicines, disseminate product information and influence prescribing preferences. The expansion of digital communication has changed not only the channels through which pharmaceutical promotion occurs but also the informational foundations upon which marketing decisions are made.

Historically, pharmaceutical promotion relied heavily on medical representatives, personal detailing, sponsored scientific events and professional relationships. These practices allowed companies to communicate directly with physicians and present information about therapeutic products. However, the growing availability of digital technologies has enabled pharmaceutical marketers to supplement conventional engagement with sophisticated systems of data collection, segmentation and behavioural prediction.

Contemporary pharmaceutical marketing may involve electronic detailing, targeted emails, professional websites, mobile applications, virtual medical conferences, customer relationship management platforms and programmatic advertising. Such systems can potentially identify physicians according to their specialty, geographical location, prescribing patterns, professional interests and previous interactions with promotional content. When combined with analytical tools, these data can generate increasingly detailed profiles of individual healthcare professionals.

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The development creates an important paradox. Digital marketing is frequently presented as a more convenient, personalised and efficient alternative to traditional pharmaceutical promotion. Physicians may receive information through channels that fit their professional schedules, while companies can allocate marketing resources more selectively. Nevertheless, the same technological capabilities can create extensive commercial visibility into professional activities that physicians may neither understand nor meaningfully control.

Mulinari and Ozieranski (2022) demonstrate that pharmaceutical marketing has long depended on commercial surveillance of physicians, particularly through the collection and analysis of prescribing information. Their examination of the American pharmaceutical market illustrates how data brokers and analytics companies facilitate the identification, classification and targeting of individual prescribers. Importantly, the introduction of greater transparency concerning financial relationships between pharmaceutical companies and physicians has not necessarily eliminated commercial surveillance. Instead, transparency-related information can itself become commercially valuable.

This development raises a fundamental question: when does the collection of professional information for pharmaceutical communication become an ethically problematic system of surveillance?

The question is particularly significant because physicians occupy a distinctive position in the healthcare system. They are professionals expected to exercise independent clinical judgement, protect patient interests and make prescribing decisions according to scientific evidence. Commercial targeting that systematically monitors their prescribing behaviour and adapts promotional interventions accordingly may create tensions between professional autonomy and corporate influence.

Privacy concerns in this context should not be restricted to the confidentiality of personal information. They also concern the ability of physicians to maintain appropriate boundaries between professional activities, commercial relationships and personal digital identities. The aggregation of information from multiple sources may reveal patterns that were never intended to be available for commercial interpretation.

Nissenbaum's (2010) theory of contextual integrity provides a useful starting point for understanding this problem. Privacy is not simply a matter of whether information is publicly accessible. It also depends on whether information flows are appropriate to the context, the parties involved and the purposes for which information is transferred. Consequently, the fact that a physician's professional information appears on a public website does not automatically establish that pharmaceutical companies should be entitled to combine it with behavioural or commercial datasets for individual-level targeting.

The ethical implications extend beyond physicians themselves. If marketing systems influence prescribing decisions, patients may indirectly experience the consequences through medicine selection, treatment costs and exposure to promotional bias. Digital targeting therefore represents a broader public health and governance issue rather than merely an internal marketing concern.

The present paper examines the darker dimensions of digitally mediated pharmaceutical promotion by investigating the relationships between physician privacy, commercial surveillance and ethical boundaries in doctor targeting. It aims to develop a conceptual understanding of how digital marketing technologies can transform professional relationships and identifies governance principles that can help reconcile legitimate pharmaceutical communication with medical independence.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A. The evolution of pharmaceutical promotion

Pharmaceutical marketing has traditionally relied upon personal relationships between medical representatives and prescribing physicians. Although these relationships have provided opportunities for product communication, researchers have repeatedly questioned whether promotional interactions consistently serve the informational needs of healthcare professionals.

Orentlicher (2010) examines prescription data mining as a mechanism through which pharmaceutical companies obtain prescribing information and use it to refine their promotional strategies. The practice illustrates how seemingly routine healthcare transactions can generate commercially valuable information about physicians.

Gostin (2012) similarly highlights the legal and ethical implications of selling prescriber-identified information to pharmaceutical marketers. His analysis draws attention to the relationship between commercial speech, professional privacy and the regulation of pharmaceutical promotion.

Digitalisation has expanded these established practices. Instead of depending exclusively on physical visits, companies can engage physicians through electronic channels and monitor interactions with promotional content. Pharmaceutical marketing has consequently become more data-intensive and increasingly dependent on the integration of communication technologies with analytical systems.

A national survey of Pakistani physicians by Zafar and colleagues (2018) provides useful evidence of this transition. The study examined the use and perceived influence of digital pharmaceutical marketing channels, including WhatsApp, websites, mobile applications and webinars. Its findings demonstrate that digital promotional communication had become a relevant component of pharmaceutical engagement, although the influence of different channels varied.

These developments suggest that digitalisation should not be interpreted simply as the replacement of traditional detailing. Rather, it represents an expansion of promotional infrastructure through which companies can combine interpersonal engagement with continuous digital communication.

B. Commercial surveillance and physician profiling

Commercial surveillance refers to the systematic collection, aggregation and analysis of information about individuals for commercial purposes. In digital environments, surveillance may operate through platforms, data brokers, analytical systems and automated profiling technologies.

Zuboff (2019) provides an influential theoretical account of the commercial extraction of behavioural information. Her discussion of surveillance capitalism explains how digital businesses transform information about human activities into resources for prediction and commercial intervention.

Although Zuboff's analysis primarily addresses broader digital economies, its central arguments offer a useful perspective on pharmaceutical marketing. Physicians increasingly interact with digital platforms that can record engagement patterns, professional interests and responses to promotional material. These information streams may be incorporated into marketing databases and used to optimise future communications.

The work of Mulinari and Ozieranski (2022) is especially important because it directly examines commercial surveillance in pharmaceutical marketing. Their research shows how physician-level data, data brokerage and analytical technologies contribute to the identification and management of prescribing professionals.

The significance of this research lies in its demonstration that surveillance does not necessarily require visibly intrusive monitoring. It may emerge through routine commercial data transactions, profiling practices and the integration of publicly available information with specialised professional datasets.

In digital pharmaceutical marketing, physician profiling may include:

- Professional specialty and institutional affiliation.
- Prescribing volume and therapeutic preferences.
- Engagement with online educational content.
- Attendance at sponsored professional events.
- Responses to previous promotional communications.
- Patterns of digital interaction and content consumption.

Not every data category is inherently inappropriate. Some information is legitimately necessary for delivering relevant professional communications. The ethical concern emerges when collection becomes excessive, purposes are inadequately disclosed or information is used to influence professional behaviour without meaningful accountability.

C. Privacy and contextual integrity

Privacy scholarship has moved beyond the narrow assumption that information protection simply requires keeping data secret. Nissenbaum (2010) argues that privacy depends substantially on the appropriateness of information flows within particular social contexts.

This approach is particularly relevant to physician targeting because professional information can be publicly accessible while still carrying contextual expectations. For example, a physician may publish research interests on an institutional website for academic communication. The commercial reuse of those details, particularly when combined with prescribing records and inferred behavioural characteristics, introduces a different informational relationship.

Solove (2013) also contributes to privacy debates by examining the difficulties associated with consent-based approaches to privacy protection. In complex information environments, individuals may be unable to understand the cumulative implications of multiple data collection and processing activities.

Applied to pharmaceutical marketing, this suggests that a physician's acceptance of a digital platform's general terms and conditions should not automatically be interpreted as informed agreement to extensive commercial profiling.

The challenge becomes more pronounced when third-party vendors, advertising intermediaries and data brokers participate in the processing chain. Physicians may know which pharmaceutical company communicates with them but remain unaware of the external organisations responsible for collecting, combining or analysing their information.

D. Digital pharmaceutical marketing and professional influence

The expansion of digital marketing has generated new possibilities for pharmaceutical communication, but it has also intensified longstanding debates about commercial influence over medical practice.

Wazana (2000) established an influential foundation for understanding the relationship between physicians and pharmaceutical companies by reviewing the effects of industry interactions on prescribing behaviour and professional attitudes. Although this work predates the period examined in the present study, it remains relevant because contemporary digital targeting extends rather than eliminates the underlying problem of commercial influence.

The more recent literature suggests that marketing effectiveness increasingly depends on the ability to identify and engage specific healthcare professionals through multiple communication channels.

Mulinari and Ozieranski (2022) show how physician-level data can support commercial targeting and the management of promotional relationships. Their analysis also raises questions about the relationship between transparency policies and the growth of commercial information markets.

A related study by Mulinari and colleagues on the broader organisation of pharmaceutical promotion reinforces the importance of examining the commercial structures behind professional engagement rather than focusing exclusively on individual interactions.

Digital communication may appear educational because it provides physicians with scientific material, product information and therapeutic updates. However, educational presentation does not necessarily guarantee informational neutrality. Promotional content can be selectively framed, personalised or delivered according to commercial priorities.

A further concern involves repeated exposure. Digital platforms can make promotional communication more frequent and persistent, potentially increasing the commercial presence within physicians' professional information environments.

The ethical distinction therefore depends not only on the content being communicated but also on how the recipient is identified, monitored and influenced.

E. Algorithmic targeting and the commercialisation of professional behaviour

Artificial intelligence and predictive analytics have increased the potential sophistication of digital pharmaceutical marketing. Algorithmic systems can classify users, identify patterns and estimate the likelihood of particular responses to promotional interventions.

In pharmaceutical marketing, such capabilities may help companies identify physicians who are more likely to prescribe a specific medicine, respond to promotional messages or participate in particular commercial programmes.

Although predictive targeting can improve marketing efficiency, it raises questions about fairness, transparency and professional autonomy.

Pasquale (2015) explains how algorithmic decision systems can create accountability problems when their operations remain difficult for affected individuals to understand or challenge. This concern is relevant when physicians are assigned commercial categories or engagement scores using proprietary analytical models.

The problem is not necessarily that algorithms make clinical decisions. Rather, algorithmic systems may shape the promotional environment within which physicians access information and evaluate therapeutic alternatives.

For example, a physician who is classified as commercially valuable may receive more frequent promotional communications, while another may receive less attention. Similarly, marketing systems may prioritise individuals according to prescribing patterns rather than their demonstrated educational needs.

Such practices risk converting professional behaviour into a continuously evaluated commercial resource.

F. Regulation, transparency and ethical accountability

Regulatory responses to pharmaceutical marketing have historically concentrated on promotional accuracy, financial relationships, conflicts of interest and disclosure requirements.

The United States Physician Payments Sunshine Act, enacted in 2010 as part of the Affordable Care Act, established a framework for reporting certain financial relationships between pharmaceutical manufacturers and healthcare professionals. The resulting Open Payments system strengthened public visibility into industry relationships.

However, transparency does not necessarily prevent the commercial reuse of information. Mulinari and Ozieranski (2022) demonstrate that transparency-related datasets can become additional resources for commercial surveillance.

European data protection law offers a different regulatory perspective. The General Data Protection Regulation (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2016) establishes principles concerning lawful processing, transparency, purpose limitation, data minimisation and individual rights. These principles are relevant to pharmaceutical marketing databases, particularly where identifiable information and profiling are involved.

In India, the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, represents an important development in the governance of digital personal information. Its applicability depends on the nature of the information and processing involved, the statutory definitions and the applicable legal framework.

Industry self-regulation also plays a role. Codes governing pharmaceutical promotion seek to establish standards for responsible professional engagement. However, traditional promotional codes may require further development to address automated profiling, third-party data brokerage, cross-platform tracking and algorithmic targeting.

The literature therefore reveals an important gap between the sophistication of digital marketing technologies and the scope of existing ethical and regulatory approaches.

III. RESEARCH GAP AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

Existing scholarship has examined pharmaceutical detailing, prescription data mining, industry influence and commercial surveillance. Nevertheless, these areas are often investigated separately.

Research on pharmaceutical promotion generally focuses on prescribing behaviour, promotional effectiveness and conflicts of interest. Privacy scholarship, by contrast, concentrates on data protection, consent and information governance. Surveillance studies frequently investigate consumer platforms and digital economies without examining the distinctive professional responsibilities of physicians.

The intersection of these research areas remains insufficiently developed.

Three specific gaps can be identified.

First, the literature provides limited integrated explanation of how physician profiling, digital communication and commercial surveillance operate together within contemporary pharmaceutical marketing.

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Second, privacy debates frequently emphasise whether data are collected lawfully, while giving comparatively less attention to whether the commercial purposes of collecting and analysing professional information are ethically appropriate.

Third, existing governance frameworks do not always adequately distinguish between legitimate professional communication and promotional practices that systematically monitor, classify and influence physicians.

The problem is especially significant in emerging digital health markets, where technological adoption may advance more rapidly than professional awareness and regulatory capacity.

Problem statement: The increasing use of data-driven digital pharmaceutical marketing creates the possibility that physicians' professional activities, communication patterns and prescribing behaviour will be transformed into commercially exploitable information. Without adequate transparency, purpose limitation and accountability, these practices may compromise physician privacy, weaken professional autonomy and indirectly affect patient-centred prescribing decisions.

This paper addresses the problem by developing an integrated conceptual framework that connects commercial surveillance mechanisms with privacy principles, medical professionalism and regulatory governance.

IV. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND HYPOTHESES

A. Research objectives

The study pursues the following objectives:

1. To examine the development of digital pharmaceutical marketing and its implications for physician targeting.
2. To identify privacy and surveillance risks arising from the collection, aggregation and commercial use of physician information.
3. To analyse how algorithmic profiling and personalised promotional communication may influence professional autonomy.
4. To evaluate the adequacy of existing ethical and regulatory approaches to digital pharmaceutical promotion.
5. To develop a conceptual framework for responsible, transparent and privacy-preserving physician engagement.

B. Research propositions

As this is a conceptual study, it does not claim to test statistical hypotheses using primary empirical observations. Instead, the following propositions are developed to guide subsequent empirical research.

P1: Greater intensity of physician data collection is associated with higher perceived privacy risk when data processing purposes are insufficiently transparent.

P2: The relationship between digital pharmaceutical targeting and perceived threats to professional autonomy is strengthened when physicians have limited knowledge of profiling and algorithmic classification.

P3: Greater transparency and meaningful physician control over data processing reduce perceived ethical concerns associated with digital promotional engagement.

P4: The use of third-party data brokers increases governance complexity and creates additional risks concerning purpose limitation and accountability.

P5: Stronger regulatory oversight and professional ethical standards moderate the relationship between commercial surveillance and threats to physician autonomy.

These propositions provide a basis for future survey-based, interview-based and mixed-methods investigations.

V. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study combines four theoretical perspectives: surveillance capitalism, contextual integrity, stakeholder theory and medical professionalism.

A. Surveillance capitalism

Zuboff (2019) conceptualises surveillance capitalism as an economic system in which behavioural information is extracted and analysed to support commercial prediction and intervention.

Applied to pharmaceutical marketing, this perspective helps explain why physician information is valuable beyond its immediate communication function. Prescribing patterns, digital engagement and professional preferences may be transformed into analytical resources for identifying commercially attractive healthcare professionals.

The framework therefore interprets physician targeting as more than conventional customer segmentation. It may represent a process through which professional behaviour becomes an object of continuous commercial observation.

B. Contextual integrity

Nissenbaum's (2010) theory of contextual integrity explains privacy through the appropriateness of information flows within specific contexts.

In the present study, the theory is used to evaluate whether the collection and use of physician information are consistent with the purposes for which the information was originally made available.

For instance, the public availability of a physician's professional profile does not necessarily justify its integration into a commercial database designed to predict prescribing responses.

Contextual integrity therefore introduces a distinction between technical accessibility and ethical legitimacy.

C. Stakeholder theory

Freeman (1984) argues that organisational responsibilities extend beyond shareholders to include groups affected by organisational activities.

Pharmaceutical companies operate within a complex stakeholder environment involving patients, physicians, healthcare institutions, regulators, professional associations and technology providers.

From this perspective, marketing decisions should not be evaluated exclusively according to promotional effectiveness or commercial return. They should also be assessed according to their implications for patient welfare, professional independence and public trust.

D. Medical professionalism

Medical professionalism is based on obligations including clinical independence, scientific integrity, confidentiality and prioritisation of patient interests.

Digital pharmaceutical targeting becomes ethically problematic when commercial strategies undermine these obligations or create environments in which physicians experience disproportionate promotional pressure.

Professional autonomy does not mean freedom from all commercial information. Pharmaceutical companies can legitimately communicate evidence about medicines. The relevant requirement is that physicians retain the ability to evaluate such information independently.

E. Integrated conceptual model

The proposed framework identifies the following relationships:

Digital marketing infrastructure creates the technological conditions for physician monitoring and engagement.

Data collection and integration generate detailed professional profiles through prescribing information, digital activity and third-party datasets.

Algorithmic targeting transforms those profiles into differentiated promotional strategies.

Ethical and professional consequences emerge through privacy risks, perceived surveillance, informational asymmetry and possible commercial influence.

Governance mechanisms including transparency, data minimisation, consent, accountability and independent oversight can moderate these consequences.

The framework can be represented as follows:

Digital marketing infrastructure
↓
Physician data collection and aggregation
↓
Commercial profiling and algorithmic segmentation
↓
Personalised promotional targeting
↓
Privacy, surveillance and professional autonomy risks
↓
Governance and ethical safeguards

The model proposes that the relationship between targeting and ethical risk is not automatic or uniform. Its strength depends on data sensitivity, processing transparency, the degree of physician control, the nature of promotional practices and the effectiveness of regulatory safeguards.

VI. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Research design

The study adopts a qualitative conceptual research design based on critical literature synthesis and normative policy analysis.

A conceptual approach is appropriate because the primary purpose is to integrate established theoretical perspectives and develop a framework for understanding an emerging ethical problem. The study does not claim to measure actual physician surveillance practices across pharmaceutical companies or to establish causal relationships using original field data.

B. Research approach

The research follows an interpretive and theory-building approach. It examines how digital pharmaceutical marketing practices can be understood through established theories of privacy, surveillance, professional ethics and organisational responsibility.

The analysis is structured around four interconnected dimensions:

1. Data practices and commercial surveillance.
2. Privacy expectations and information governance.
3. Professional autonomy and promotional influence.
4. Regulatory accountability and ethical safeguards.

C. Sources of information

The conceptual synthesis draws upon peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, legal and regulatory documents, and relevant institutional publications.

The principal literature period is 2010–2025, while selected earlier foundational works are included where necessary to explain the theoretical development of the subject.

Relevant materials include publications addressing:

- Pharmaceutical detailing and prescribing data mining.
- Digital marketing and physician engagement.
- Surveillance capitalism and data brokerage.
- Information privacy and contextual integrity.
- Algorithmic profiling and accountability.
- Pharmaceutical promotion regulation.
- Professional ethics and conflicts of interest.

D. Analytical procedure

The analysis proceeds through four stages.

First, the literature is organised according to the major research themes.

Second, recurring ethical concerns are identified, including informational asymmetry, inadequate disclosure, behavioural profiling and commercial influence.

Third, these concerns are interpreted through the four theoretical perspectives.

Finally, the relationships are integrated into a conceptual framework that identifies potential mechanisms of ethical harm and possible regulatory interventions.

E. Methodological limitations

Because this paper is conceptual, it does not contain original physician survey responses, company-level marketing datasets or statistical estimates.

The findings should therefore be understood as theoretically grounded analytical conclusions rather than empirically demonstrated population-level relationships.

A further limitation is that pharmaceutical marketing systems differ considerably across jurisdictions. The availability of prescription data, data protection rules, professional regulations and industry practices varies between countries.

Consequently, the framework should be adapted to local institutional and legal circumstances before being used to assess specific pharmaceutical markets.

VII. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

A. Analytical overview

The conceptual analysis identifies five major dimensions through which digital pharmaceutical marketing can generate privacy and ethical concerns.

These dimensions are examined as interconnected processes rather than independent problems.

B. Data collection and informational asymmetry

The first concern involves the imbalance between the information available to pharmaceutical companies and the information physicians possess about commercial data processing.

Companies may have access to prescribing databases, engagement metrics, professional directories and analytical services. Physicians, however, may have limited visibility into the sources, combinations and subsequent uses of their information.

This creates informational asymmetry.

The problem becomes more serious when data are obtained through intermediaries. A physician may interact with a particular pharmaceutical company without knowing that several external organisations participate in the collection or analysis of related information.

From a contextual integrity perspective, the central issue is whether these information transfers are appropriate to the professional context.

The analysis suggests that transparency must extend beyond general privacy notices. Physicians should be able to understand the categories of information collected, the purposes of processing, the involvement of third parties and the implications of profiling.

C. Commercial profiling and the surveillance of professional behaviour

The second dimension concerns the transformation of professional information into commercial profiles.

Physician segmentation is not inherently unethical. Pharmaceutical companies may reasonably distinguish between medical specialties when communicating relevant therapeutic information.

However, the ethical character of segmentation changes when profiling involves continuous monitoring of prescribing patterns and attempts to predict or influence professional decisions.

Mulinari and Ozieranski (2022) provide an important foundation for this interpretation by documenting the commercial infrastructures that support physician surveillance.

Their analysis indicates that commercial surveillance is not necessarily limited to information collected directly by pharmaceutical manufacturers. It may involve wider networks of data brokers, analytics providers and marketing intermediaries.

The conceptual implication is that responsibility should not be restricted to the organisation that ultimately delivers the promotional message. It should extend across the relevant data-processing chain.

D. Algorithmic personalisation and professional autonomy

The third dimension concerns the effects of algorithmically personalised promotional communication.

Digital systems can potentially determine the timing, frequency, content and channel of promotional engagement according to physician profiles.

This may improve the relevance of professional communication. For example, a specialist treating a particular patient population may benefit from receiving information about relevant therapeutic developments.

Nevertheless, personalised marketing can also produce selective informational environments. Physicians may receive repeated messages that reinforce existing prescribing preferences while alternative therapeutic perspectives receive less promotional attention.

The concern is particularly important when commercial algorithms are designed primarily to maximise product adoption rather than support balanced medical education.

Professional autonomy requires physicians to evaluate evidence without inappropriate commercial pressure. Algorithmic systems that systematically optimise promotional influence may challenge this requirement even when individual communications appear professionally acceptable.

E. Privacy risks and the limits of consent

The fourth dimension involves the practical limitations of consent.

Digital pharmaceutical marketing may involve multiple platforms and organisations, each with its own privacy documentation. Physicians may find it difficult to understand the full range of potential data uses.

Solove (2013) demonstrates why individual consent cannot, by itself, resolve every privacy problem associated with complex information systems.

The present analysis extends this concern to professional data. A physician's acceptance of a platform's general conditions should not automatically authorise every subsequent use of professional information, particularly when the information is combined with data from unrelated sources.

Consent should therefore be supplemented by purpose limitation, data minimisation, meaningful access rights and effective accountability.

F. Regulatory fragmentation

The fifth dimension concerns the limitations of existing governance arrangements.

Data protection legislation, pharmaceutical promotional codes, medical professional standards and corporate compliance programmes frequently operate within separate institutional frameworks.

Yet digital pharmaceutical marketing crosses these boundaries.

For example, an organisation may comply with general advertising requirements while using a third-party analytics provider whose profiling practices create concerns about professional privacy.

Similarly, public disclosure of industry payments may strengthen transparency while making additional information available for commercial analysis.

The analytical conclusion is that digital pharmaceutical marketing requires coordinated governance rather than isolated compliance with individual regulatory requirements.

G. Summary of conceptual analysis

Analytical dimension	Principal ethical concern	Potential consequence
Data collection	Limited transparency	Informational asymmetry
Physician profiling	Excessive commercial monitoring	Loss of privacy
Algorithmic targeting	Commercially selective communication	Reduced professional independence
Consent mechanisms	Inadequate understanding of data uses	Weak individual control
Regulatory fragmentation	Incomplete accountability	Governance gaps

The five dimensions demonstrate that the ethical risks associated with digital pharmaceutical marketing are cumulative. A single promotional email may appear relatively harmless, but the infrastructure supporting repeated personalised communication can involve extensive data collection, profiling and commercial optimisation.

VIII. DISCUSSION

The findings of the conceptual analysis indicate that digital pharmaceutical marketing should be understood as a socio-technical system in which information, commercial incentives and professional relationships interact.

The main contribution of this paper is the argument that physician targeting cannot be evaluated exclusively according to promotional content or communication effectiveness. The underlying data infrastructure must also be examined.

A. Reconsidering the meaning of physician privacy

Traditional privacy discussions often distinguish between public and private information. However, digital marketing complicates this distinction.

Professional information may be publicly available for legitimate purposes, such as academic networking, medical referrals and professional identification. Its subsequent aggregation and use for commercial profiling may nevertheless create privacy concerns.

Nissenbaum's (2010) contextual integrity framework helps explain this distinction. Information that is appropriate in one professional context may become inappropriate when transferred into another context with different purposes and expectations.

Therefore, ethical physician targeting should be evaluated according to the circumstances of information collection and reuse, not simply its public availability.

B. Transparency is necessary but insufficient

Transparency is widely recognised as an important governance principle. Public disclosure of pharmaceutical payments and professional relationships can help identify conflicts of interest.

However, Mulinari and Ozieranski (2022) demonstrate that transparency-related information may also be incorporated into commercial surveillance systems.

This creates an important policy paradox: making information visible does not necessarily reduce its commercial exploitation.

The implication is that transparency policies should be accompanied by restrictions on inappropriate secondary use. Data disclosure should support public accountability without automatically legitimising unrestricted commercial processing.

C. Commercial influence and medical professionalism

The relationship between pharmaceutical marketing and physician independence has long been debated.

Digital targeting introduces additional complexity because commercial influence can become less visible and more continuous. Instead of relying solely on direct promotional encounters, companies may use automated systems to determine which physicians receive particular messages and how frequently those messages are delivered.

This raises a question about the boundary between relevant professional communication and behavioural influence.

The distinction should be based on the purpose, transparency and effects of the communication. Marketing that provides accurate and appropriately balanced information can serve a legitimate function. Marketing that exploits detailed behavioural profiles to maximise prescribing responses requires substantially greater ethical scrutiny.

D. The patient as an indirect stakeholder

Physicians are the immediate targets of digital pharmaceutical marketing, but patients remain important indirect stakeholders.

If promotional targeting affects the information environment within which prescribing decisions are made, patients may experience downstream consequences.

These consequences could include increased exposure to commercially favoured medicines, inadequate consideration of alternatives or prescribing decisions influenced by selective promotional information.

This paper does not claim that every instance of physician profiling produces inappropriate prescribing. Rather, it identifies a plausible pathway through which commercial surveillance may affect patient-centred care.

The stakeholder perspective therefore requires pharmaceutical companies to consider not only physician engagement outcomes but also the broader implications for healthcare quality and public trust.

E. Implications for emerging markets

The problem deserves particular attention in emerging pharmaceutical markets.

Countries experiencing rapid growth in digital healthcare communication may have regulatory and institutional arrangements that are less developed than the commercial technologies being adopted.

India provides a relevant example. Its expanding digital healthcare environment creates opportunities for professional education and pharmaceutical communication, while the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, establishes an important legal framework for personal data governance.

However, responsible digital pharmaceutical promotion also requires attention to the specific characteristics of healthcare institutions, professional relationships, industry practices and applicable pharmaceutical marketing standards.

The appropriate policy response should therefore combine general data protection principles with sector-specific professional safeguards.

F. Reframing ethical pharmaceutical marketing

The central argument is that responsible pharmaceutical marketing should move beyond a narrow compliance model.

Compliance generally asks whether a company has fulfilled specified legal and procedural requirements. Ethical governance asks a broader question: whether the collection and use of information are justified, proportionate and consistent with the professional and public interests affected.

This distinction is important because emerging surveillance practices may fall into regulatory grey areas without necessarily serving legitimate healthcare objectives.

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A more comprehensive approach should therefore incorporate privacy protection, professional autonomy, responsible communication and independent oversight.

IX. FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Principal findings

The conceptual analysis produces six principal findings.

Finding 1: Digital targeting extends established surveillance practices.

Digital pharmaceutical marketing does not create physician surveillance from nothing. It expands existing practices involving prescription data, physician segmentation and commercial detailing through more integrated digital systems.

Finding 2: Public professional information is not automatically free for unrestricted commercial exploitation.

The ethical legitimacy of data processing depends on context, purpose and the appropriateness of subsequent information flows.

Finding 3: Algorithmic personalisation creates additional risks for professional independence.

Targeted promotional exposure can shape the information environment of physicians, particularly when commercial systems prioritise prescribing responses over independent educational needs.

Finding 4: Consent alone cannot adequately address complex data processing.

Meaningful privacy protection requires organisational accountability, purpose limitation, transparency and data minimisation in addition to consent.

Finding 5: Transparency mechanisms require protection against inappropriate secondary commercial use.

Disclosure policies may create additional information resources for commercial analytics unless accompanied by safeguards governing reuse.

Finding 6: Existing governance approaches require greater coordination.

Data protection law, pharmaceutical promotional standards and medical professional ethics should be considered together when evaluating digitally mediated physician engagement.

B. Managerial implications

Pharmaceutical companies should recognise that responsible marketing involves more than increasing digital engagement and improving promotional conversion rates.

Organisations should establish internal governance systems that evaluate the ethical implications of physician data collection and targeting.

Recommended managerial practices include:

- Conducting privacy impact assessments before introducing physician profiling systems.
- Maintaining clear records of data sources and third-party processors.
- Restricting the collection of information to legitimate and necessary purposes.
- Avoiding unnecessary integration of professional and personal information.
- Providing physicians with accessible explanations of profiling practices.
- Establishing internal review mechanisms for algorithmically personalised campaigns.
- Separating scientific communication objectives from inappropriate behavioural manipulation.
- Monitoring third-party vendors for compliance with privacy and professional standards.

C. Recommendations for pharmaceutical companies

Pharmaceutical companies should adopt a privacy-by-design approach when developing digital marketing platforms.

First, data collection should be limited to information genuinely required for legitimate professional communication.

Second, companies should provide clear information about how physician data are obtained, processed, stored and shared.

Third, physicians should be provided with meaningful options to access, correct and, where applicable, object to the processing of their information.

Fourth, automated targeting systems should undergo periodic ethical review to identify discriminatory, misleading or excessively intrusive practices.

Finally, organisations should establish clear accountability for the conduct of external data brokers and marketing technology providers.

D. Recommendations for regulators and policymakers

Regulatory institutions should develop clearer standards for the commercial processing of physician information.

Such standards should address:

1. Disclosure of physician profiling and targeting practices.
2. Restrictions on unnecessary or disproportionate data collection.
3. Appropriate limits on secondary use of professional information.
4. Accountability for third-party data intermediaries.
5. Oversight of automated profiling where applicable under data protection law.
6. Accessible mechanisms for physician complaints and redress.
7. Coordination between data protection and pharmaceutical promotional regulators.

In India, these issues should be considered alongside the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, its applicable rules and the relevant pharmaceutical marketing framework.

The implementation of these safeguards should be consistent with the legal responsibilities of the organisations involved and the rights available to the affected individuals.

E. Recommendations for medical associations and professional institutions

Medical associations should strengthen professional awareness of digital pharmaceutical marketing practices.

Continuing professional development programmes could include modules on:

- Commercial data collection and physician profiling.
- Privacy risks in professional digital platforms.
- Conflicts of interest in electronic detailing.
- Critical evaluation of sponsored scientific content.
- Ethical management of pharmaceutical communication.

Professional institutions should also encourage physicians to distinguish between scientifically valuable information and promotional communication designed primarily to achieve commercial objectives.

F. Proposed ethical governance model

This study proposes a five-pillar governance model for responsible digital pharmaceutical marketing.

G. Pillar 1: Transparency

Physicians should receive clear and accessible information about data collection, profiling and commercial targeting.

H. Pillar 2: Data minimisation

Companies should collect and process only the information necessary for specified and legitimate purposes.

I. Pillar 3: Professional autonomy

Promotional systems should respect independent clinical judgement and should not rely on deceptive or coercive behavioural manipulation.

J. Pillar 4: Algorithmic accountability
Automated profiling and targeting systems should be subject to appropriate documentation, risk assessment and human oversight.

K. Pillar 5: Independent governance
Regulators, professional associations and institutional ethics bodies should participate in monitoring digital pharmaceutical marketing practices.

Together, these pillars provide a practical framework for aligning commercial innovation with privacy protection and professional responsibility.

X. CONCLUSION AND SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Digital pharmaceutical marketing has created significant opportunities for pharmaceutical companies to communicate with physicians more efficiently and deliver professional information through increasingly sophisticated digital channels. However, these developments have also expanded the commercial value of physician information and introduced new concerns relating to surveillance, privacy and professional independence.

The central argument of this paper is that the ethical implications of digital pharmaceutical marketing extend beyond the accuracy and acceptability of individual promotional messages. They involve the wider infrastructure through which physicians are identified, monitored, classified and targeted.

The integration of prescription information, professional profiles, digital engagement metrics and third-party analytical services can create extensive commercial visibility into medical professionals. Although certain forms of data-driven engagement may be legitimate and beneficial, their ethical acceptability depends on transparency, proportionality, purpose limitation and respect for professional autonomy.

The analysis also demonstrates that transparency alone cannot resolve the problem. Disclosure mechanisms may improve accountability while simultaneously creating additional opportunities for commercial data processing. Similarly, consent is important but cannot independently address the complexity of modern digital information ecosystems.

A more comprehensive governance approach is therefore required. Pharmaceutical companies should adopt privacy-centred marketing practices, regulators should address inappropriate commercial profiling, and medical associations should strengthen professional awareness of digital surveillance risks.

The proposed five-pillar model offers a conceptual foundation for developing such an approach. It positions transparency, data minimisation, professional autonomy, algorithmic accountability and independent governance as mutually reinforcing principles.

Several directions for future research emerge from this study.

First, empirical investigations could examine physicians' awareness of digital data collection and their perceptions of commercial surveillance. Survey research across different medical specialties and geographical regions could identify variations in privacy concerns and acceptance of digital promotional practices.

Second, qualitative interviews with physicians, pharmaceutical marketing professionals, regulators and data analytics providers could provide deeper insights into the operational mechanisms of physician targeting.

Third, comparative research could examine differences between jurisdictions with established data protection regimes and emerging digital healthcare markets.

Fourth, future studies could investigate whether exposure to personalised pharmaceutical marketing is associated with measurable differences in prescribing decisions, while accounting for clinical, institutional and patient-related factors.

Finally, research should examine the effectiveness of privacy-preserving technologies and independent algorithmic audits in reducing the ethical risks associated with commercial physician profiling.

Ultimately, digital innovation in pharmaceutical marketing should not be evaluated solely by its ability to improve targeting accuracy or commercial performance. Its legitimacy must also depend on whether it respects the privacy, independence and professional responsibilities of the physicians whose information sustains these systems. A responsible digital pharmaceutical sector must recognise that physicians are healthcare professionals with ethical obligations, not simply commercial audiences whose behaviour can be continuously measured and monetised.

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