

Multichannel Marketing in the Romanian Pharmaceutical Industry: A Pre-, During, and Post-COVID-19 Comparison

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Abstract. Multichannel marketing solutions create the possibility of comprehensive strategies in the pharmaceutical industry, which allows for a variation of interactions with healthcare professionals. In the last decades, these solutions have evolved significantly. Thus, there was a shift from traditional models that were specifically focused on sales, to hybrid data-driven approaches, and then, with the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an increase in the importance of digital solutions. Obviously, quarantine, social distancing, but also the workload of healthcare professionals (HCPs) during the COVID-19 pandemic, was a catalyst towards the digitalization of marketing solutions. On the other hand, it has also been a strong disruption for traditional offline marketing channels, which targeted face-to-face interaction between pharmaceutical companies and healthcare professionals (HCPs). This paper examines how multichannel marketing has evolved from traditional offline marketing to digital strategies within the pharmaceutical industry due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It specifically investigates how communication methods between pharmaceutical companies and healthcare professionals are affected. In this regard, a questionnaire was developed and distributed among professionals working in the pharmaceutical marketing field. Through this, it aims to evaluate from the perspective of these professionals the effectiveness of multi-channel marketing in communication that was carried out before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Effective communication in the post-pandemic era, targeting the pharmaceutical industry, must have a hybrid approach that integrates digital engagement, personalized content and face-to-face interactions.

Keywords: Multichannel Marketing, Pharmaceutical industry, COVID-19, Marketing, Healthcare professionals (HCPs).

Introduction

The pharmaceutical industry is a highly regulated and limited field in terms of communication strategy. These regulations influence the tools and messages used to present new (innovative) medicines at the time of launch, but also in post-approval activities. In practical terms, communication platforms and activities related to this process are designed to bring added value in a real-time period, becoming essential. Meeting this need is enabled by digital technologies

considering the framework of transparency and regulatory guidelines. Thus, multichannel marketing (MCM) solutions have become an essential strategy in the pharmaceutical industry for the involvement of healthcare professionals (HCPs).

In this context, pharmaceutical companies can integrate both offline and online channels in their communication, to effectively provide scientific information, drug updates and necessary educational resources, while also ensuring compliance with industry-specific regulations. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the pharmaceutical industry's communication activity was largely based on face-to-face interaction, conferences and print media. The pandemic period led to a sudden forced shift to digital marketing, with restrictions on physical meetings and quarantine imposed.

Also, in the pre-COVID-19 pandemic period, the pharmaceutical industry's use of multichannel marketing (MCM) was based on a mix of face-to-face interactions and traditional media channels. The first category includes: sales representatives' meetings with healthcare professionals (which was the dominant strategy for promoting new drugs, medical devices and therapies); participation in medical conferences and events (pharmaceutical companies have invested heavily in large-scale medical conferences, symposia and sponsored events to interact with healthcare professionals and key opinion leaders (KOLs)). As for the second category of the mix, this includes: print and TV advertising (traditional print ads, medical magazines and TV ads were widely used to educate doctors); but also limited digital engagement (Websites, email campaigns and online medical events played a supplementary role, instead of serving as the main channels of engagement).

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted traditional marketing strategies, forcing pharmaceutical companies to rapidly adopt and expand digital channels. Thus, platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and others have enabled companies, healthcare professionals, and other stakeholders to connect. The direct effects of these changes are: a decrease in face-to-face sales visits (restrictions on face-to-face meetings have limited the ability of sales representatives to visit doctors' offices, hospitals, and clinics); a shift to virtual engagement (webinars, virtual conferences, and digital meetings); and an increase in digital advertising (companies have shifted their budgets to digital platforms such as social media, search engine marketing (SEM), and targeted email campaigns).

As the pharmaceutical industry adapts to the post-pandemic landscape, companies are refining their multichannel strategies to effectively integrate both online and offline engagement. Key trends included: hybrid engagement models (a combination of virtual and face-to-face interactions is now the norm), sales reps using a mix of digital tools and selective face-to-face visits to optimize engagement (customer experiences across digital, print, and face-to-face touchpoints), increased compliance and data privacy regulations (with the increased use of digital platforms, regulatory scrutiny over data security and compliance with healthcare marketing laws has intensified), content marketing (there is a greater emphasis on patient-centric content marketing strategies, using blogs, videos, and social media to provide reliable health information and build trust).

This study explores how pharmaceutical companies adapted their marketing channel during the pandemic, how communication with HCPs is evolving, and how pharmaceutical companies are adopting digital technology. The paper takes a two-fold approach: a comprehensive literature review on multichannel marketing practices, particularly in the context of the pharmaceutical sector, followed by an online questionnaire targeting pharmaceutical industry representatives.

Literature review

Multichannel marketing is a strategy that involves using multiple, distinct channels to reach customers and ensure that interactions with the company are coordinated and harmonized across

these touchpoints (Verhoef et al. 2015). Multichannel marketing involves the simultaneous or coordinated use of multiple channels with the aim of optimizing the interaction between the company and the customer (Rangaswamy and Van Bruggen, 2005). Technological progress and the expansion of the Internet have played a crucial role in transforming marketing channels. While the launch of e-commerce in the 1990s significantly boosted research in multichannel marketing, the scope and focus of this research have continued to evolve (Bharat et al., 2023).

Multichannel marketing is an essential strategy for creating a competitive advantage by enabling companies to reach consumers across a variety of offline and digital channels to provide them with a seamless and uniform experience. The authors consider that effective use of multiple channels not only increases market reach, but also increases customer loyalty through accessibility and personalization. They argue that success in multichannel marketing requires a clear vision, well-executed segmentation, and alignment between strategic objectives and tactical execution (Ford, J., & Ibrahim, E., 2013).

According to studies conducted in the USA in 2010, adopting a multichannel strategy allows companies to interact more effectively with healthcare professionals, adapting messages and communication methods according to their needs and preferences (Cegedim Strategic data, 2010).

At a conference from 2006, focused on the role of online marketing and electronic detailing in the pharmaceutical industry, speakers highlighted how digital tools are reshaping communication with healthcare professionals and improving the measurement of marketing effectiveness. Also, they emphasized the importance of data-driven strategies and the growing need for pharmaceutical companies to adopt integrated, multichannel approaches to remain competitive in a digitally driven healthcare landscape (Bates, A. K, 2006). This demonstrates that, at that time, European pharmaceutical companies had already begun adopting multichannel marketing strategies to engage with healthcare professionals more effectively (Luvayo, Fredrick M. 2017).

In an interview conducted by Capgemini Consulting in 2012, it is specified that pharmaceutical companies recognize the importance of building customer relationships at the sales representative level rather than through corporate branding. Therefore, with face-to-face interactions still playing a vital role, it is essential to integrate digital tools to support and enhance representative-led engagement (Capgemini Consulting, 2012).

Schierholz and Glissmann in 2006 highlight the importance of multichannel strategy in the pharmaceutical industry, emphasizing the need for an evaluation of channel performance in an integrated and customer-oriented way. In a regulated and competitive environment such as the pharmaceutical one, the choice and coordination of communication channels are critical for the success of relationships with healthcare professionals (Schierholz, Ragnar & Sussane G., 2006).

A multichannel strategy is essential for effective modern campaign management, enabling companies to create integrated and personalized customer experiences across multiple channels. Gartner and Hopkins emphasize that success in multichannel campaign management depends on organizations' ability to synchronize messages and use real-time data to optimize campaign performance (Gartner, A. & Hopkins, J., 2014). A multichannel strategy in the pharmaceutical industry is vital to overcoming information overload and capturing the attention of healthcare professionals. The authors consider that success depends on the intelligent integration of digital and traditional channels, providing relevant and personalized messages, adapted to the specific needs of the audience (Grosch, B., Anu Gupta, A. 2014).

The literature review shows that multichannel marketing approaches have a positive impact in multiple sectors, especially among micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) and within the pharmaceutical industry (Rahayu et al. 2022; Luvayo 2017).

Yadav et al. (2024) believe it is important to address the challenges associated with multichannel marketing in the pharmaceutical industry by carefully considering the role of data analytics and adhering to regulatory frameworks. Pharmaceutical companies can enhance the impact of their marketing strategies by combining online and offline channels, allowing them to connect with their target audiences through their preferred modes of communication. Proença (2021) highlights expanding communication from offline to the internet and the growing importance of social media and eWOM (Electronic word-of-mouth communication) in healthcare communication, particularly considering the COVID-19 pandemic (Proença, Maria Helena Dias, 2021).

In the pharmaceutical industry, effective communication depends more on a balanced integration between traditional and digital channels. As stakeholder expectations evolve and digitalization transforms interaction strategies, pharmaceutical companies must adopt a multichannel approach that emphasizes scientific credibility and regulatory compliance. Combining face-to-face interactions with data-driven digital tools can strengthen stakeholder relationships and ensure effective and timely communication of product benefits throughout the life cycle (Krendyukov et al., 2020).

In the pharmaceutical industry, communication channels for scientific exchange include both conventional and more recently adopted digital approaches, as presented in Table 1 (Krendyukov et al., 2020):

Table 1. Communication channels to exchange with HCPs

Conventional	Digitalized
Face-to-face interactions during scheduled visits or meetings	Virtual meetings, webinars, online advisory boards
Field-based teams (e.g., commercial, medical science liaisons)	Remote detailing, virtual visits
In-person CME-accredited educational events	Online educational platforms
Industry-sponsored symposia	Virtual workshops, interactive web-based roundtables, symposia
In-person workshops and roundtables	Digital exhibition booths, virtual product demos
Exhibition booths at professional conferences	Hybrid or fully virtual conference participation
Physical attendance at conferences	Email campaigns, company websites
Direct post mailings (printed materials)	Social media platforms (e.g., LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook)
	Wearable and mobile devices (e.g. consumer health-tracking apps)

*CME continuing medical education

Source: Krendyukov et al. (2020).

Finally, the literature review presents several frameworks for implementing and optimizing multichannel marketing strategies in the pharmaceutical and healthcare sectors (Wick et al., 2024).

Krendyukov et al., in 2020 performed a LinkedIn survey of pharmaceutical industry representatives. Participants were asked a series of questions around (about) which communication channel(s) they believed were the most effective or optimal to deliver (for delivering) product-specific information to HCPs. Attributes were rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (not effective) to 5 (most effective). The results showed that 91% of responders rated face-to-face interaction as the most effective communication channel and 9% as effective. Other forms of direct interaction such as round tables and hospital meetings were rated by all responders as effective (55%) or most effective (45%). Promotional activities at congresses were rated as effective by 64% and mediocre or less effective by 36% of responders. Communication via social media platforms was rated as less effective or mediocre by 90% of responders. A similar rating was given to manufacturer-driven digital channels or websites.

Organizations that, before the health crisis, put more emphasis on valuable demonstration activities (personal meetings, conferences, exhibitions, etc.) had the opportunity to transfer some of these activities to the online environment: webinars, online presentations, online exhibitions, etc. (Arsene et al., 2021). According to Morrish et al. (2020), these transfer measures in the area of online activities have had a major impact on the business environment and in relations with partners.

To further inform the findings from the literature regarding current communication trends, an online survey of pharmaceutical industry representatives was conducted. The objective was to assess the most effective communication channels for delivering product-specific information.

Methodology

This study used quantitative methodology and survey methods. The research instrument was an online questionnaire that was conducted to assess the opinions of pharmaceutical industry representatives on the most effective communication channels for delivering product-specific information.

Study Design & Data Collection

A structured, web-based questionnaire was designed using Google Forms to ensure ease of access and standardized responses. The survey included a mix of closed-ended, rate scale, and multiple-choice questions to capture quantitative insights while maintaining consistency in data collection. The questionnaire was distributed among 39 respondents from 20 different pharmaceutical companies, ensuring a diverse representation of industry perspectives. Participants were selected based on their professional involvement in pharmaceutical communication, marketing, and sales.

Sample description

The collected data will be analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency distribution and percentage analysis, to identify key trends. Graphical representations will be used to visualize findings.

The study aims to provide actionable insights into the preferred communication channels within the pharmaceutical industry, guiding companies in optimizing their product information dissemination strategies.

From Table 2, it is clear that 51.30 % of respondents were 30 to 39 years of age group, 35,90% of respondents belonged to the 40 to 49 years of age, 7.70% of respondents belonged to the 20 to 29

years of age, and 5,1% of respondents belong to the 50 to 59 years of age group, therefore it can be concluded that most of the respondents belong to youth having age group of 30 to 39 years.

Table 2. Age in Years

Age in years	Frequency	Percent
20 – 29	3	7.7%
30 – 39	20	51.3%
40 – 49	14	35.9%
50 – 59	2	5.1%
Total	39	100%

Source: Authors' own research.

From Figure 1, 61.5% of respondents were female whereas 38.5% of respondents were male, therefore, it can be concluded that most of the respondents were female in this study.

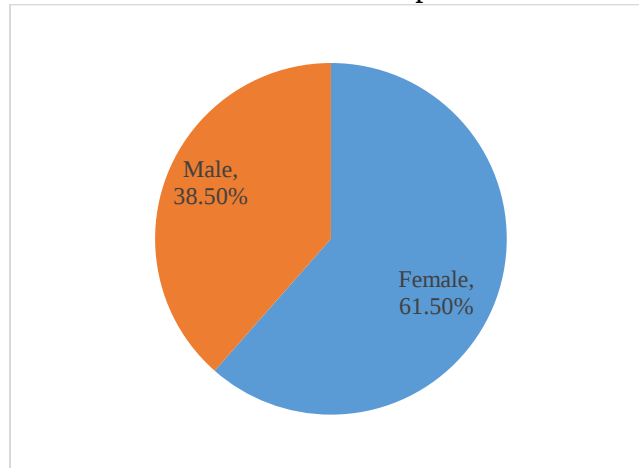


Figure 1. Gender

Source: Authors' own research.

From Figure 2, it is clear that 38.56 % of respondents have a bachelor's degree, 53.8% of respondents have a Master's degree, and 5.1% of respondents have a post-doctorate and 2.6% have a post-doctorate, therefore it can be concluded that most of the respondents have Master's degree.

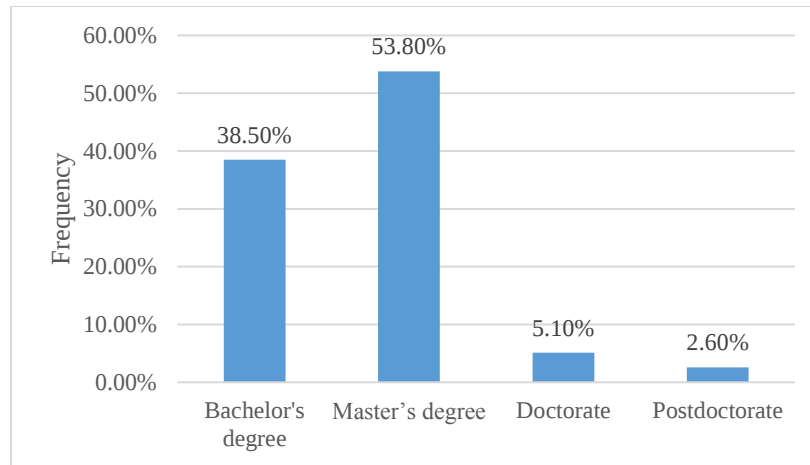


Figure 2. Education level

Source: Authors' own research.

From Figure 3, it is clear that 5.1 % of respondents were sales representatives 28.2% of respondents were medical representatives, 15.4% of respondents were product managers, 12.8% of respondents were key account managers, 2.6% of respondents were an area sales manager, 10.2% of respondents were a sales manager, 18% of respondents were marketing managers, 7.7% of respondents were General managers, therefore it can be concluded that most of the respondents were medical representatives followed by marketing managers and product managers.

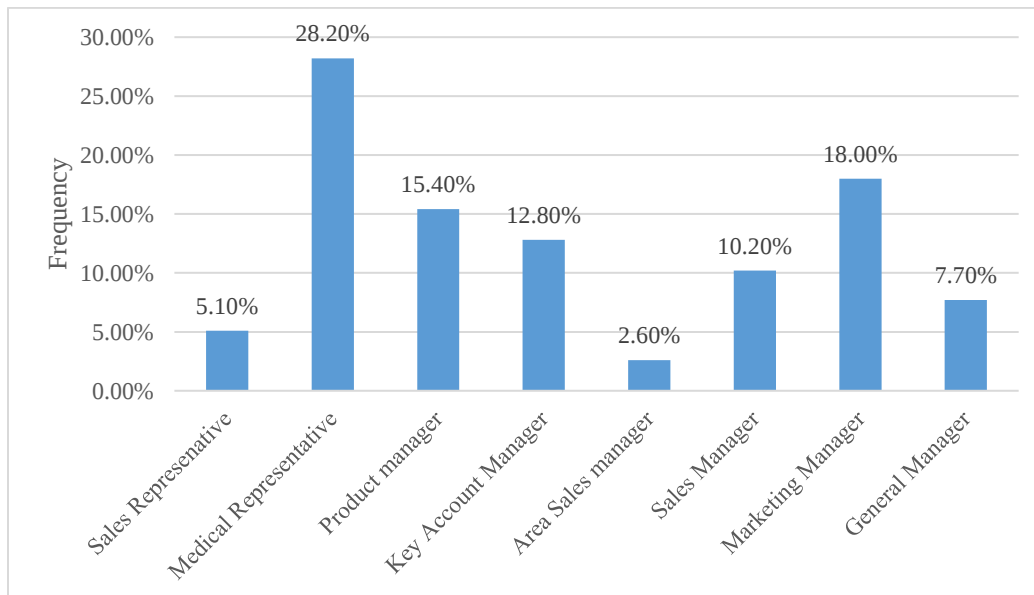


Figure 3. Position in the company

Source: Authors' own research.

From Table 3, it is clear that 10.30 % of respondents were less than 2 years in a company, 66.70% of respondents belong to the 2 to 10 years in a company, 20.50% of respondents belong to the 11 to 20 years in a company, and 2.6% of respondents belong to the 21 to 30 years of age group,

therefore it can be concluded that most of the respondents belong to seniority having years group of 2 to 10 years.

Table 3. Years in the company

Years in the company	Frequency	Percent
<2	4	10.3%
2-10	26	66.7%
11-20	8	20.5%
21-30	1	2.6%
>30	0	0%
Total	39	100%

Source: Authors' own research.

From Table 4 it is clear that 51% of respondents belong to the Over the Counter Drugs & Prescription Drugs pharmaceutical market and 49% to the medical devices pharmaceutical market; therefore, it can be concluded that the difference between the frequency of the pharmaceutical Market's Segment is insignificant.

Table 4. Pharmaceutical Market Segment

Pharmaceutical Market's Segment	Frequency	Percent
Over The Counter Drugs & Prescription Drugs	20	51%
Medical Devices	19	49%
Total	39	100%

Source: Authors' own research.

From Table 5, 66% of respondents belong Healthcare Professionals (HCPs)-physicians and 33% of respondents belong Healthcare Professionals (HCPs)-pharmacists therefore it can be concluded that most of the respondents belong to Healthcare Professionals (HCPs)-physicians.

Table 5. Pharmaceutical Market Segment

Target market	Frequency	Percent
Healthcare Professionals (HCPs)-physician	26	66%
Healthcare Professionals (HCPs)-pharmacists	13	33%
Total	39	100%

Source: Authors' own research.

From Table 6, it is clear that 92.3% of companies used Sales Representative Visits, 79.5% of companies used Medical Conferences & Events as a marketing channel, 33.3% of companies used Print Advertising (Medical Journals, Magazines) as a marketing channel 35.9% from

companies used Online, TV & Radio Advertisements as a marketing channel, 43.6% from companies used Email marketing as a marketing channel, 46.2% from companies used Social Media as a marketing channel, 38,5% used Website as a marketing channel, and 56.4% used Webinars & Virtual Events as a marketing channel, therefore it can be concluded that most of the companies used Sales Representative Visits and used Medical Conferences & Events as a marketing channel followed by Webinars & Virtual Events.

Table 6. Marketing channels used by the company

Marketing channels by the company	Frequency	Percent
Sales Representative Visits	36	92.3%
Medical Conferences & Events	31	79.5%
Print Advertising (Medical Journals, Magazines)	13	33.3%
Online, TV & Radio Advertisements	14	35.9%
Email marketing	17	43.6%
Social media	18	46.2%
Website (Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and Search Engine Marketing (SEM))	15	38.5%
Webinars & Virtual Events	22	56.4%

Source: Authors' own research.

Below is an analysis of the questionnaire on the most effective marketing channels in communication with HCPs, online and offline before, during, and after the pandemic.

From Figure 4 77% of companies thought that the offline channel remains the most effective method for HCPs communication. The preference for online marketing channels has evolved significantly, especially with the rise of effectiveness in communication from 15% in pre-COVID-19 to 31% in post-COVID-19.

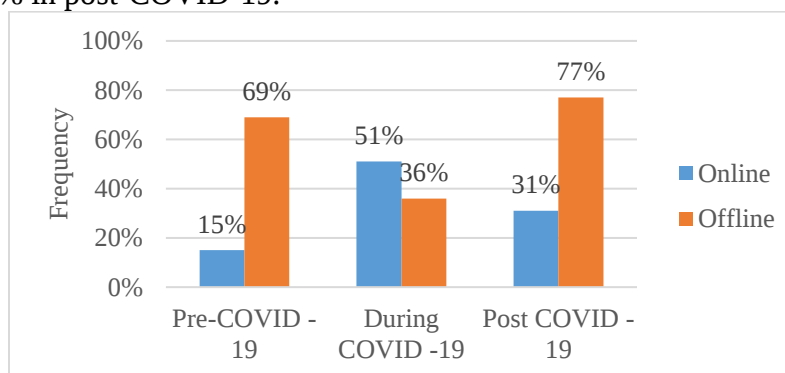


Figure 4. Offline and Online Marketing Channel Pre-, during, and post-COVID-19

Source: Authors' own research.

Pre-COVID-19

Pharmaceutical marketers relied heavily on in-person sales visits, many HCPs preferred attending live conferences, symposiums, and networking events, most marketing budgets were allocated to offline channels and are clear that it is clear that 69% of companies thought that is the most effective method for HCPs communication.

During COVID-19

Pharmaceutical marketers canceling or postponing in-person events, more companies shifted budgets from physical to digital marketing, and sales reps adopted virtual meetings instead of in-person visits. HCPs preferred digital communication during the pandemic, citing convenience and time efficiency.

Companies adopted Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and webinars for physician engagement. Pharmaceutical companies increased spending on social media, targeted email campaigns, and personalized content delivery based on HCP interests became a key focus. From Tables 10 and 9 51% of companies thought that the online channel is the most effective method for HCPs communication.

The biggest challenges were finding it difficult to establish relationships with new clients without face-to-face interaction, most pharmaceutical marketers struggled with HCP engagement due to digital fatigue and compliance and regulatory concerns with digital platforms.

Post - COVID-19

Conferences now offer hybrid formats with both live and virtual participation and Sales reps are blending virtual and in-person meetings for optimized outreach. Companies are synchronizing offline and online channels to provide a seamless customer experience. Direct-to-HCP education campaigns via digital platforms are increasing. Companies are investing in secure data analytics tools to ensure compliance with privacy laws.

Discussions

Pharmaceutical companies use a mix of traditional and digital channels to reach healthcare professionals (HCPs). The preference for marketing channels has evolved significantly, especially with the rise of digital engagement post-COVID-19.

Below, Figure 5 presents a comparison between results from one pilot survey on what is the most effective or optimal communication channel(s) to deliver product-specific information to HCPs (Krendyukov et al., 2020) and results from (the) questionnaire survey from this paper. From Figure 5, is clear that digital channels have increased from 17% to 31%, and the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the shift toward digital engagement.

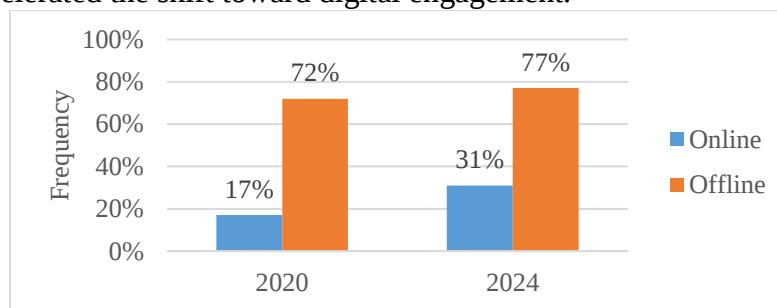


Figure 5. Comparison of Offline and Online Marketing Channel: 2020 vs 2024.

Source: Authors' own research.

The evolving landscape of pharmaceutical marketing presents both opportunities and challenges as companies seek to effectively engage with healthcare professionals (HCPs) and it is critical to develop tailored communication and integrate technological advances for a better understanding of HCPs and payers' needs and decision drivers. Traditional marketing approaches, such as in-person meetings and printed materials, have long been essential for conveying medical and scientific information. However, the rise of digital platforms, social media, and real-world evidence has introduced new avenues for more targeted, efficient, and data-driven communication. Digitalization has made information readily available and accessible online at any time, social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn allow data and messages to be diffused rapidly in real-time to vast audiences. Pharmaceutical companies and international medical societies are increasingly using social media (LinkedIn) as a platform for their communications and advertising, enabling them to engage more actively with consumers and HCPs. Evidence from our online survey highlights the continued importance of face-to-face interactions, particularly in conveying scientific and professional information to healthcare professionals (HCPs) and other stakeholders. However, these interactions must be more structured, evidence-based, and aligned with regulatory compliance to ensure credibility and effectiveness. As the industry shifts toward a more digital-centric model, pharmaceutical marketers must be well-equipped to communicate complex medical information across multiple channels. Digital platforms, including social media, webinars, and online portals, offer enhanced accessibility and engagement opportunities. The survey results suggest that while in-person meetings remain valuable, digital tools are increasingly playing a crucial role in supplementing and reinforcing these interactions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study highlights the significant transformation in pharmaceutical marketing strategies due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While offline channels remain the preferred method for HCP communication, the adoption of digital platforms has surged, demonstrating increased effectiveness post-pandemic. The transition from in-person interactions to virtual engagements presented challenges, including digital fatigue and regulatory concerns. However, companies have adapted by integrating hybrid approaches, combining physical and digital channels for a more effective and seamless experience. Moving forward, pharmaceutical firms are expected to continue leveraging digital tools, data analytics, and hybrid communication models to enhance HCP engagement and marketing effectiveness.

Existing literature and survey findings suggest that the most impactful communication strategies combine traditional face-to-face interactions with an expanded use of digital and social media platforms. A successful multichannel by integrating offline and online strategies, pharmaceutical companies can navigate industry challenges, foster meaningful connections, and remain competitive in an increasingly digital landscape.

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