

It's Magic, You Know: The Reframing of Ozempic as a Weight Loss Drug

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Abstract

Advertising for Ozempic is inescapable. We have come to expect an advertisement for Ozempic around every corner. From scrolling social media to watching a hockey game, Ozempic is everywhere. This paper seeks to understand the multilayered and multimedia advertising campaigns, alongside lay-advertising on social media platforms that have allowed Ozempic and its producer Novo Nordisk to redefine and reframe the drug from its intended use as an insulin-producing type 2 diabetes medication to a widely sought-after weight loss medication. My analysis examines the role of social media in shaping consumer perceptions of Ozempic, the influence of direct-to-consumer advertising in promoting off-label uses, and the resulting consequences on drug accessibility and health perceptions. Specifically, by scrutinizing media portrayals on TikTok and direct-to-consumer advertising strategies, this paper unveils the dynamics of pharmaceutical product reframing and its effects on the dominant discourses surrounding said products. As Ozempic attempts to redefine what a healthy body should look like, it is imperative to analyze how social media and pharmaceutical advertising campaigns shift cultural understanding, reinforcing anti-fat narratives and limiting access to life-saving drugs for those who need them.

Keywords

Ozempic, reframing, advertising, health communities, social media, direct-to-consumer advertising, TikTok, miracle drug, off-label

Introduction

Semaglutide, better known as the active ingredient of Ozempic and other brand-name drugs, is a medication used for the long-term treatment of type 2 diabetes. Ozempic has surged in popularity in recent years. This surge is not for its intended purpose of treating diabetes, but for its potential as a weight loss medication (Suran, 2023). The exact origin behind this surge of popularity is unclear, but stories from users on social media platforms and major celebrities, alongside official advertising campaigns for the medication, greatly contributed to putting Ozempic on the map and effectively reframing the medication. This paper aims to analyze the ways through which Ozempic has been reframed in Canada since the drug's approval in 2018 and how its reframing has impacted both those with type 2 diabetes who are reliant on the drug as well as those taking the medication for weight loss purposes. By conducting content analysis on purposively selected videos to examine the media representations of Ozempic via TikTok and direct-to-consumer advertising, it is possible to understand better how the purpose and perception of Ozempic and other pharmaceutical products morph and become reframed.

Background

Ozempic was originally approved by Health Canada in 2018 to treat type 2 diabetes (Health Canada, 2024). The drug is manufactured and distributed by Novo Nordisk, a pharmaceutical company that specializes in producing products for diabetes treatments (Novo Nordisk, n.d.). Ozempic is a brand-name version of semaglutide, a drug that mimics glucagon-like peptide-1, which increases the amount of insulin the body produces (Suran, 2023). A major side effect of semaglutide is that it makes users feel less hungry by suppressing their appetite, making users eat less, often resulting in the loss of body fat (Suran, 2023). Because of these side effects, Ozempic has become better known as a weight-loss medication. The medication is often prescribed off-label, meaning unintended and unapproved uses, for people experiencing obesity or seeking to lose weight (Suran, 2023). In 2021, in response to the shifting use of Ozempic, Novo Nordisk created Wegovy, a version of semaglutide specifically approved for chronic weight management (Suran, 2023). There are minimal differences between Ozempic and Wegovy, specifically in the dosage (Suran, 2023). While Ozempic has a maximum dose of 2.0 mg per week, Wegovy's maximum dose is 20% greater at 2.4 mg per week (Suran, 2023). Despite Novo Nordisk introducing Wegovy into the market, Ozempic remains popular as a weight loss drug and continues to be prescribed for off-label use, making the product more difficult to obtain for those who need it for their diabetes treatment (Suran, 2023).

Methods

In analyzing the techniques and rhetoric used to reframe Ozempic as a weight loss medication, short-form TikTok videos promoting the drug and officially produced television and print adverts were purposively collected for analysis. With the rapidly rising popularity of Ozempic, it is important to consider the many ways that information about the drug is disseminated. These platforms and media were chosen due to their popularity, and ability to disseminate information to a wide demographic. By analyzing both official television advertisements and user-created TikTok videos, a better understanding of the many facets that act in the reframing of Ozempic can be attained.

To collect samples from TikTok, I performed a qualitative content analysis of the videos presented in the “TOP” section of the search term “Ozempic” using the platform’s built-in search function. This process was performed using a freshly opened private browsing window to ensure that any previously obtained user analytics and cookies did not influence the content algorithmically placed in the search results. After performing this search, I compiled the top results and analyzed the videos, placing them into categories based on their messaging, producer, whether the video was an advertisement for Ozempic, and whether it contributed to Ozempic’s framing as a miracle drug. The videos were placed in these categories by considering the video, audio, caption, and the account posting the video. For example, reuploads of official Ozempic television commercials with “#commerical” in the TikTok video description were categorized as advertisements. Finally, using this collected data, two videos were purposively selected for analysis in this paper to show the breadth of content and information presented when searching for videos about Ozempic on TikTok. These videos were specifically chosen to illustrate the breadth of content about Ozempic on TikTok and the pervasiveness of the idea of Ozempic as a ‘miracle drug’. The process for collecting televised and print advertisements similarly used content analysis to analyze sources found from Google searches for print advertisements, and YouTube and Google searches for televised advertisements. Again, three samples from this analysis were purposively selected to best illustrate the marketing techniques used when advertising Ozempic. Television advertisements for Ozempic largely follow the same formula, featuring individuals in colourful environments speaking on the positive health outcomes resulting from the medication. The advertisements analyzed in this paper were chosen due to their emphasis on weight loss as a positive health outcome.

This sampling method is not without its limitations. First, the sampling process was largely limited by the scope of this paper and could be strengthened by performing qualitative content analysis on a larger number of TikTok videos and advertisements to create a more representative dataset and provide more in-depth analysis. Second, due to the ever-changing algorithm on TikTok, the videos analyzed in the “TOP” section of my TikTok search are unlikely to mirror the videos presented to others. This highlights the ephemeral nature of social media platforms and the difficulties in analyzing online content.

Framing Ozempic as a Miracle Drug on TikTok

Scrolling through the top results of the search term “Ozempic” on TikTok yields hundreds of videos with captions such as “[C]all it what you want but the miracle shot LITERALLY changed my life” (West, 2024) and “The new “miracle” weight loss drug - Ozempic explained” (asapSCIENCE, 2023). The videos range from ‘transformation videos’ like May West’s (2024) that praise Ozempic’s weight-loss properties, to educational videos like those created by *asapSCIENCE* (2023) that seek to inform viewers about the effects and side effects of Ozempic. Despite the differing contexts between these two genres of video, one thing remains consistent—the framing of Ozempic as a thing of magic or a ‘miracle drug.’ The surge in popularity of Ozempic videos on TikTok has largely been attributed to its reframing as a miracle weight loss drug (Burns, 2023; Duboust & Huet, 2023), placing these videos at the center of discussions about Ozempic.

There is little doubt that TikTok introduced individuals to Ozempic who knew very little or nothing about the drug beforehand. In a descriptive analysis of the top 100 TikTok videos with the #Ozempic hashtag, Basch et al. (2023) found that videos about Ozempic are incredibly popular, garnering over 69 million views and 2 million likes. Notably, 86% of the videos were uploaded by consumers, with only 14% being uploaded by professionals (Basch et al., 2023), showing that individual narratives dominate the platform with little room for professional voices that could warn about possible side effects and dangers of using Ozempic for weight loss. Additionally, the majority of videos posted with the #Ozempic hashtag feature messaging about weight loss, with a third of those videos advocating Ozempic as an effective weight loss medication (Basch et al., 2023). What is most problematic about Ozempic’s presence on TikTok is that less than one-third of videos mention the potential side effects of the drug, with only three videos explicitly mentioning that weight loss is an off-label use of Ozempic (Basch et al., 2023). This research reinforces a similar study by Sabrina

Han et al. (2024) which found that the relative Google search value for Ozempic as a weight loss drug greatly increased in the early months of 2023, coinciding with the drug's surge in popularity on TikTok. Notably, although Novo Nordisk released Wegovy for public sale in June 2021, Ozempic has remained more popular in searches than Wegovy (Han et al., 2024). Taken together, this research presents a picture of a landscape in which individuals online are more interested in discussing, sharing, and researching Ozempic as a means of losing weight.

Ozempic's popularity on TikTok can be seen as a result of anti-fat narratives proliferated by popular media. By employing fat studies, a field of research that examines portrayals and attitudes towards body weight and appearance through an intersectional lens, a better understanding of social media's role in the popularity of Ozempic can be obtained. In the media, the bodies most often featured are slim, creating a normalized image of the 'desirable body' as being one that is not fat (Kyrölä, 2021). The depictions of weight in media define how individuals are supposed to feel about their bodies and what they can do to make themselves look thinner, or 'normal' (Kyrölä, 2021). Media plays an important role in defining the body and what is deemed normal; social media platforms like TikTok are no different. Marisa Minadeo & Lizzy Pope (2022) found that the majority of TikTok videos under body image and eating behaviour hashtags are pushing normative ideas that portray weight loss as desirable and something to be strived for, with individuals acting as quasi-experts. They claim that "the many trends associated with weight loss omit lifestyle factors that play a role in weight and health, and leave viewers with the message that weight loss and thinness is achievable and desirable to all" (Minadeo & Pope, 2022, p.9). The main difference between new media like TikTok and legacy media in representing the body and fatness is that new media is participatory by nature. While the beacons of thinness and 'healthy,' normal, bodies in legacy media were often celebrities (Kyrölä, 2021), new media places that expectation on the individual. With new media, individuals are no longer simply spectators, but active participants held up to the same standards of desirability as others on the platform.

To better understand Ozempic's role in reframing weight loss narratives, it is important to understand why TikTok users may be so drawn to seeking out the medication for weight loss purposes. Deborah Lupton (1994) describes a power imbalance between doctors and patients, where the patient must advocate to receive proper medical care while navigating the power relations inherent between a doctor and a patient. To approach a doctor about health issues, individuals must justify why they are seeking an appointment (Lupton, 1994). Those who are seen as fat must 'justify' their body weight to get treatment (Lupton, 1994; Hunt, 2003). Being obese or overweight is

problematized and requires a solution before a patient will be taken seriously. Ozempic offers an easily attainable solution to this issue. Alan Hunt (2003) suggests that this power imbalance between the patient and healthcare provider, alongside a dispersion and incompatibility of expert knowledge, results in a distrust of expert opinion in favour of the opinion of quasi-experts. The quasi-expertise of TikTok users sharing their personal narratives about the effectiveness and benefits of Ozempic offers a more compelling and compassionate experience than seeking out a traditional expert. TikTok videos about Ozempic are free from the judgement and surveillance of traditional healthcare professionals, thus creating a more comfortable environment to pursue weight loss in the pursuit of healthiness.

Reframing Through Direct-to-Consumer Advertising

Though it is easy to attribute the reframing of Ozempic as a weight loss medication to the sudden increase in social media posts about the drug, the rhetoric was initially pushed by Novo Nordisk long before the drug's popularity surged on TikTok. It is important to analyze how the advertising disseminated directly from Novo Nordisk presents Ozempic's weight loss qualities. Flipping between cable television channels, it is likely to encounter one, or many, Ozempic advertisements. These advertisements are illegal in Canada. Health Canada defines three types of advertisements regarding prescription medication: *product claims*, which mention the name and use of medication; *reminders*, which name the medication without giving a use; and *help-seeking*, which informs that there is a new treatment for a health condition without mentioning a product name (Gardner et al., 2003). Both reminder and help-seeking advertisements are legal in Canada, while Health Canada has deemed product claim advertisements illegal (Gardner et al., 2003; Health Canada, 2020). However, the impact and consumer effect of these advertisements cannot be overlooked. As many cable television packages include channels broadcast from the United States and other foreign countries, Canadians are still likely to consume these advertisements, meaning that the impact these advertisements have cannot be disregarded when analyzing Canadian populations.

Direct-to-consumer advertisements from 2018, back when the drug was originally approved, touted claims about Ozempic's weight-loss side effects. One advertisement claims, ". . . and you may lose weight. In the same one-year study, adults lost on average up to 12 pounds" followed by a man excitedly exclaiming "Oh! Up to 12 pounds?" (FilmComm Talent, 2018, 0:16). As Ozempic is not a weight-loss medication, it cannot legally be advertised as such (Health Canada, 2020). While this line

is being read there is a message on the screen that reads, “Ozempic is not a weight loss drug,” but by mentioning the weight-loss side effects of Ozempic, the advertisement reinforces the idea that the medication is effective for weight loss. This trend remains consistent throughout Ozempic’s television advertising campaign. Advertising from 2019 utilizes the same “Oh! Up to 12 pounds?” line (Ozempic, 2019) and an advertisement aired in 2022 and 2023 begins with a man stating, “With my Ozempic Tri-Zone I lowered my A1C, CV risk, and lost some weight” (Commercial Archivist, 2022, 0:07), placing the weight loss benefits at the same level of importance as regulating type 2 diabetes symptoms. The visual elements of Ozempic advertisements continue to promote the drug as a wondrous product by using strategies not uncommon in advertising targeted toward children. Despite these advertisements not being directed toward children, the same techniques are used to help promote a sense of childlike wonder. Charlene Elliott (2021) uses content analysis to find that vitamin supplements targeted towards children often use child-friendly fonts, multiple bright colours, and fun shapes to appeal to children. These same techniques are used in Ozempic commercials. Take the Ozempic logo (Figure 1) that appears throughout the commercials, it is bright and bubbly, with the logo often seen floating like a balloon throughout the advertisements. The commercials also push the idea of fun through the background settings of the advertisement. The scenes jump between various fun locations, like a monster truck rally, a wild west town, an arcade, a mini golf course and more. Ozempic is not just a weight loss or diabetes drug, it is fun and youthful (Commercial Archivist, 2022; Ozempic, 2019). Though these advertisements follow rules and regulations and do not explicitly promote Ozempic as a weight loss drug, by enthusiastically exclaiming its weight loss benefit and using wondrous childlike imagery, these advertisements actively promote off-label use.

Figure 1



The logo used in Ozempic advertising and packaging.

From *Ozempic branding*. By Igor Biasini, n.d.

(<https://creativepool.com/igorbiasini/projects/ozempic-branding-for-novonordisk>)

Even disregarding the messaging about weight loss, the advertising materials for Ozempic are not innocent actors in promoting the medication as a miracle drug. The advertising material subtly and explicitly ensures that the viewer knows that the effects of Ozempic are magical. Almost every cable TV advertising for Ozempic begins with the same jingle: “Oh, oh, oh, Ozempic!” (Commercial Archivist, 2022; Ozempic, 2019). The jingle is a parody of the popular 80s song “Magic” by Pilot. At first, this music choice seems innocuous enough. Jingles are a common and effective way to increase brand awareness and help consumers commit brands to memory, and companies are willing to pay millions to associate their brands with popular music (Oakes, 2007). However, the specific song choice is no coincidence. The original section of the song that the advertisements parody contains the lyrics “Oh, oh, oh, it’s magic, you know?” Though these lyrics are not present in Ozempic advertisements, those who are familiar with the original song are likely to associate or sing its original lyrics while listening to the commercial (Oakes, 2007). Thus, this song choice promotes a connection between the lyrics “it’s magic, you know?” and Ozempic, further strengthening the idea that Ozempic is a magical drug. The weight loss effects of Ozempic are not just a nice side effect— they are magical.

Advertisements for Ozempic are everywhere. The vast majority of the direct-to-consumer Ozempic advertisements seen in Canada act as ‘reminder ads’ which Health Canada defines as advertisements that are “limited to the name, price and quantity of a prescription drug” and “do not include reference to a disease state” (Health Canada, 2020, Information for prescription drug manufacturers section). This allows Ozempic advertisements to omit crucial information about the purpose of the drug and focus on increasing the presence of Ozempic as a brand name in the minds of consumers. These advertisements are seen everywhere and are practically unavoidable, from large advertisements on street billboards (Figure 2) to small adverts displayed on the boards of hockey games (Figure 3). Notably, as reminder advertisements, none of these ads contain any more information than the brand name and a catchphrase. Reminder advertisements can prove problematic because they assume that the consumer of the advertisement already knows what the medication is used for. When Ozempic is not permitted to advertise its intended purpose, the meaning of the advertisement and use-case of the medication is prescribed meaning by the consumer. If the public perception of Ozempic has been reframed from a diabetes medication to a

weight loss drug, then the reminder advertisements effectively serve as adverts for a weight loss medication.

Figure 2

An advertisement for Ozempic is seen on a billboard in Toronto on Friday, June 16, 2023.

Note: An Ozempic billboard from Toronto with the text "I just asked. Ask your doctor about Ozempic." From Ozempic ads seem to be everywhere, doctors and ethics experts are worried. By Cole Burston, 2023, The Canadian Press

<https://www.saobserver.net/trending-now/ozempic-ads-seem-to-be-everywhere-doctors-and-ethics-experts-are-worried-3761407>.



Figure 3

Ozempic Advertisements at a Winnipeg Jet's Hockey Game.

From *Ozempic - What's the Hype*. By Dauphin Clinic Pharmacy, 2019

(https://www.dauphinclinicpharmacy.com/health_articles_details.php?news_id=1488)

When examining advertisements for pharmaceutical products, it is important to question who these advertisements are for. Would those consciously living with type 2 diabetes not already know about the options available to them? It is unlikely that those who are viewing these ads are going to visit a doctor and leave with a type 2 diabetes diagnosis. Jerry Avorn (2023) finds that individuals with high exposure to direct-to-consumer advertising for pharmaceuticals were less likely to receive a health diagnosis for the product they had seen in advertising than those with low exposure to direct-to-consumer advertisements. Instead, it could be argued that the purpose of these reminder advertisements is not to remind people who have type 2 diabetes about possible treatments, but instead to recruit more individuals to buy into using Ozempic as a miracle weight loss drug. Research into the effectiveness of direct-to-consumer advertising in selling prescription medication has provided mixed results, with conflicting research and data lacking enough statistical significance to make any concrete claims (Avorn, 2023). However, if these advertisements did not provide Novo Nordisk with material gain and financial incentives, it is doubtful that the company would continue their advertising campaign. With that, there is little doubt why Novo Nordisk has been so accepting of the reframing of Ozempic. Simply put, it makes the company a lot of money. In the first seven months of 2023, Novo Nordisk spent \$120 million US dollars on advertisements (Constantino, 2023) and made \$33.71 billion US dollars in the same calendar year (Smith, 2024). It does not matter that the advertisements can be interpreted as deceptive or that they help promote, both implicitly and explicitly, unstudied and potentially dangerous off-label uses for Ozempic. It makes Novo Nordisk money, and if it continues making the company money, the advertisements will continue and off-label usage will continue to surge.

Impact and Considerations

By prioritizing profits over the needs of those using Ozempic for its intended purposes, Novo Nordisk has put both those living with type 2 diabetes and those using Ozempic for weight loss in dangerous situations. The reframing of Ozempic has resulted in an off-balancing of the supply and demand of the medication, creating a shortage of the drug and making it more difficult to obtain for those who need it to manage their type 2 diabetes (Edwards, 2024). This has resulted in the price of Ozempic quadrupling in the United States since 2020 (Gilbert, 2023). Additionally, the

weight-loss effects that make Ozempic so appealing for off-label use are not permanent. When people stop using Ozempic, it is most likely that individuals will regain most of the fat they lost as their body readjusts to the lack of semaglutide and increased appetite (Suran, 2023).

Ultimately, does looking thin equate to being healthy? Is diet culture and accelerated weight loss in general healthy? Richard Klein (2010) asks what it means to be 'healthy.' For Klein, 'health' is a loaded term that represents the unachievable. Individuals are expected to constantly aspire towards a greater level of 'health' or risk being seen as 'unhealthy'. Klein (2010) suggests that dieting culture is more harmful to the health of the nation than obesity, stating,

“I don't think we should necessarily conclude that dieting is riskier than obesity.

But the mere possibility calls us to be suspicious of the claim we have been persuaded to believe. Namely obesity is riskier than obsessive dieting or diet drugs” (p.16).

Instead of embracing the concept of biomedical health, he believes it is more effective to pursue pleasure. Klein emphasizes the importance of feeling comfortable in one's own body and doing what brings pleasure internally, rather than focusing on the external pressures that create a system where individuals feel expected and pressured to take weight loss drugs like Ozempic to appear as healthy members of society. By placing less emphasis on the messaging from social media and advertisements and more emphasis on our individual experiences, a more healthy and pleasurable way of living can be achieved.

Conclusion

Ozempic is unavoidable and will likely remain as such for the foreseeable future. The drug provides a unique example of how off-label uses for prescription medications are popularized through social media and advertising. TikTok presents an effective breeding ground for off-label drug use as personal testimonies disseminate rapidly on the platform. Traditional advertising coexists with social media, promoting off-label uses in more subtle ways while also promoting a drug's intended use. This paper only scratches the surface of how pharmaceutical products are advertised and how their meanings morph throughout time. To live in the modern age is to be advertised to and consume social media messaging, ultimately reframing the way everything is understood, of which Ozempic is a prime example.

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