

Mental Health Apps & AI-Targeted Ads for Psychiatric Drugs Raise Alarms, CCHR Warns

Mental health watchdog highlights potential dangers of AI-driven marketing and apps in the mental health industry.

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/EINPresswire.com/ -- In recent years, the mental health app industry has surged with around 10,000 to 20,000 available, offering everything from assessment to treatment that includes powerful and potentially debilitating psychiatric drugs.[1] [Citizens Commission on Human Rights](#) (CCHR) International says that mental health apps are simply driving more consumers to the psychopharmaceutical industry, utilizing targeted AI ads to reach specific audiences on social media platforms. These apps employ sophisticated algorithms that analyze users' behaviors, interests, and interactions to identify individuals who can be targeted for specific types of ads. Information about the user can then be utilized to personalize content to influence the user's behavior.



CCHR calls for regulation to safeguard individuals from potential harm and misuse of AI-targeted mental health advertising and apps, particularly given the ease with which psychiatric drugs are being dispensed to the mass population.

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Albert Fox Cahn, Surveillance Technology Oversight Project

Once a user is directed to a mental health app, they can then be quickly diagnosed. Given that any diagnosis of mental disorder, as listed in psychiatry's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) cannot be detected or confirmed by any physical or neurobiological test, brain scan, or X-ray, the way medical diseases can, these diagnoses are always subjective. This holds true whether the diagnosis comes from a practitioner or a mental health app. And the “treatment” for any mental health disorder diagnosis, is nearly always psychiatric drugs.

Even the former DSM-IV Task Force Chairman, psychiatrist Allen Frances, said, “There are no objective tests in psychiatry—no X-ray, laboratory, or exam finding that says definitively that someone does or does not have a mental disorder.” Further, he said, “There is no definition of mental disorder. It’s bull—. I mean, you just can’t define it.”[2]

In a lengthy Vox article published in August 2022 titled, “‘Scary easy. Sketchy as hell’: How startups are pushing [ADHD drug] on TikTok,” the focus was on the concerning trend of mental health apps on TikTok, particularly those related to ADHD diagnoses. The article raised concerns about the mass marketing of ADHD drugs by telehealth companies on the platform and the potential dangers of using such mental health diagnosis apps.[3]

CCHR says the concern is warranted, with quick diagnosis and readily available prescriptions via many of these mental health apps, it is doubtful that those being diagnosed and given prescriptions are being accurately informed of the drug's risk. For example, ADHD drugs were recently [cited by the US FDA as causing addiction](#), even when taken as prescribed.[4]

Albert Fox Cahn, the founder and executive director of the Surveillance Technology Oversight Project, a New York-based civil rights and privacy group, recently told of his own experience with AI-generated advertising and a specific mental health app, in Insider. He encountered targeted ads on Instagram for a specific ADHD drug, promising an easy path to obtaining it through the app. The process of getting prescribed the drug turned out to be worryingly simple. Cahn highlighted a new trend of aggressive, data-driven marketing for habit-forming drugs, drawing parallels to the OxyContin crisis, where targeted marketing led to widespread opioid addiction. He now calls for regulations banning targeted ads for dangerous drugs to prevent another public-health catastrophe. He said, “...above all, we need rules that ban targeted ads for drugs that can get patients hooked. The United States and New Zealand are the only countries in the world that allow direct-to-consumer marketing for prescription drugs. No matter what safeguards are in place, as long as companies can combine them, habit-forming medications and AI ad targeting will make a deadly cocktail.”[5]

Mental health apps connect users to therapists and psychiatric nurse practitioners for a monthly fee. However, a recent Bloomberg investigation into a specific company revealed harmful overtreatment. Former nurses that worked for the company said they feared it was fueling a new addiction crisis by making stimulants and other amphetamines so easy to get.[6]

The growing trend of AI-targeted advertising for prescription drugs raises red flags, as it can easily exacerbate the prescription drug epidemic already plaguing the U.S.

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According to IQVia's Total Patient Tracker Database (formerly IMS Health), [76,940,157 Americans are already prescribed psychiatric drugs](#), which carry 409 drug regulatory warnings citing dangerous side effects, including dependence, addiction, and a host of serious adverse reactions.

[1] Isobel Whitcomb, "Mental wellness apps are basically the Wild West of therapy," Popular Science, 3 Jan. 2022, <https://www.popsci.com/science/mental-health-apps-safety/>

[2] Allen Frances, "Psychiatric Fads and Overdiagnosis," Psychology Today, 2 June 2010, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/dsm5-in-distress/201006/psychiatric-fads-and-overdiagnosis>; Gary Greenberg, "The Book of Woe— Inside the Battle to Define Mental Illness," WIRED, 17 Dec. 2014, <https://www.wired.com/2010/12/ff-dsmv/>

[3] Sara Morrison, "Scary easy. Sketchy as hell.": How startups are pushing Adderall on TikTok," Vox, 29 Aug. 2022, <https://www.vox.com/recode/23310326/tiktok-adhd-telehealth-done-adderall>

[4] "FDA updating warnings to improve safe use of prescription stimulants used to treat ADHD and other conditions," Food and Drug Administration, 11 May 2023, <https://www.fda.gov/media/168066/download>

[5] Albert Fox Cahn, "The looming addiction crisis fueled by AI," Insider, 13 July 2023, <https://www.businessinsider.com/ai-adderall-targeted-advertising-opioid-crisis-cerebral-purdue-pharma-2023-7>

[6] "How mental health apps can accelerate the psychiatric prescribing cascade," Lown Institute, 18 Mar. 2022, <https://lowninstitute.org/how-mental-health-apps-can-accelerate-the-psychiatric-prescribing-cascade/>

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