

Public perception of pharmacists: Film and television portrayals from 1970 to 2013

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Abstract

Objectives: To determine the percentage of pharmacists portrayed in a positive, negative, or neutral light in films and television shows available in the United States from January 1970 to July 2013. Secondary objectives were to evaluate pharmacist characters as heroes, villains, or victims; assess pharmacist characters' demographics; and determine the presence of pharmacist characters in medical-themed television shows.

Design: Retrospective, observational, descriptive study.

Setting: A review of available U.S. film and television from January 1970 to July 2013 at an academic institution.

Participants: 214 television episodes or films that contained at least one pharmacist portrayal.

Intervention: Electronic inquiries requesting submissions of known pharmacist portrayals were distributed to pharmacy professionals in national and state-affiliated pharmacy organizations and to faculty, staff, and students at the University of South Carolina. Electronic databases and search engines (Internet Movie Database [IMDb], Bing, and Google) were consulted and used to further research possible pharmacist portrayals. The study investigators developed an algorithm incorporating social norms, common pharmacist practices, and viewer perceptions to determine positive, negative, or neutral status for each pharmacist portrayal.

Main outcome measures: Year and genre of media, demographics of identified pharmacist characters, portrayal status of identified pharmacist characters, and number of pharmacist characters and appearances per each television show reviewed.

Results: In the films and television shows reviewed, there were 231 pharmacist portrayals, with 160 unique pharmacist characters. Of the 231 portrayals, 145 (63%) were negative, 30 (13%) were positive, and 56 (24%) were neutral. Of the 160 unique characters, 121 (76%) were male, 120 (75%) were Caucasian, and 86 (54%) were younger than 50 years old. The name of the character was provided for 70 (44%) of the pharmacists portrayed.

Conclusion: The portrayal of pharmacists in U.S. film and television is primarily negative. Pharmacists and pharmacy organizations are encouraged to be vocal proponents of the profession and educate trainees on the importance of an enhanced public perception.

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In the ever-changing landscape of U.S. health care, pharmacists play a role in innovating and expanding patient care services to improve access and ensure patient safety; however, the public perception of pharmacists is an important factor to consider as pharmacy services expand.

Behavioral theory indicates that perception is shaped by environment, the context in which information is received, and personal knowledge and experience.^{1,2} Most survey data reveal that health professionals have a positive perception of pharmacy services and suggest that pharmacist involvement in the team-based approach to health care improves patient care, saves lives, decreases inappropriate medication use, and reduces unnecessary costs.^{3,4} Solicited opinions in Gallup polls have revealed that when the public is directly asked to rate the honesty and ethical standards of different professions, pharmacists consistently rank alongside nurses and doctors as among the most trusted professionals.⁵⁻⁸

Unsolicited or unprompted opinions have demonstrated a different view of pharmacists' role and value. Two studies in which patients were directly asked about their opinion of pharmacy services revealed that they want pharmacists to provide medication reviews and counseling and that they are very satisfied or receptive to receiving such services.^{9,10} However, in other studies in which patients were presented with extended options regarding the scope of pharmacy practice, the majority said they prefer seeing their physician to discuss medications and are less confident in pharmacists' ability to counsel on general health and wellness.^{1,11,12}

Key Points

Background:

- The public's unsolicited view and perception of pharmacists' role may be reflected in films and television shows.
- Numerous articles evaluate media portrayal of physicians and nurses, but articles evaluating media portrayal of pharmacists are rare.

Findings:

- Overall, the portrayal of pharmacists in films and television shows over the last 4 decades has been predominantly negative.
- Pharmacist characters infrequently have recurring roles and are rarely portrayed in fictional medical-themed television shows.
- These data serve as a call to action for the pharmacy profession to educate trainees on the value and status of media portrayals and for the development of targeted campaigns that depict a positive and accurate media profile of pharmacists.

While physicians have displayed positive attitudes toward collaborative agreements with pharmacists, studies of their level of comfort with specific pharmacist services have shown that they are less favorable about pharmacists making independent decisions in community settings and providing immunizations and/or disease state education.^{1,13} In one study, an unsolicited physician viewpoint failed to recognize the pharmacist as a key figure in educating clinicians on drug information. Upon acknowledgment of the omission, the physician extensively praised pharmacists' potential services contribution but also highlighted the lack of pharmacist utilization in the community.^{14,15}

As an unsolicited source of public information, television and film depictions of pharmacists may offer further insight into public awareness and perception of the profession. Television shows and films are viewed by millions of people daily and are commonly considered a trusted source of medical information, despite the variation in quality and accuracy of such information.^{16,17} However, while physicians and nurses are commonly seen on television and in film, and several studies have found value in evaluating the portrayal of these professions in fictional dramatizations,¹⁸⁻²¹ there is comparatively limited published literature discussing the media portrayal of pharmacists.²²

Objectives

The primary objective of this study was to determine the percentage of pharmacist characters portrayed in a positive, negative, or neutral manner in films and television shows available in the United States from January 1970 through July 2013. Secondary objectives were to determine the percentage of pharmacist characters portrayed as heroes, villains, or victims; assess pharmacist characters' demographics; calculate the number of pharmacist characters by year, genre, and type of film or television show; and determine the presence of pharmacist characters in medical-themed television shows. Our study offers insight into the potential influence and representation of public perception of the profession.

Methods

We conducted a retrospective review of appearances of or references to pharmacists in films and television in the United States from January 1970 to July 2013. This project was exempted by the University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board.

Data collection

Study investigators conducted a comprehensive search of the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), including film and television characters, plot summaries, and scripts.²³ We used the Bing and Google online search engines to identify additional data. Key search terms included "pharmacist," "pharmacy," "druggist," "chemist," "apothecary,"

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