

Clickbait Cures: How Meta and Google Tolerate a Dubious Meds Market in the EU

Executive Summary

Meta and Google are hosting ads promoting questionable health products across Europe. Our research has uncovered a long-running campaign that uses fake endorsements from actual doctors to sell unverified supplements. These ads deceive users with false claims, images of real doctors, and fabricated websites. They also violate platform policies; Meta and Google remove the ads but allow the accounts behind them to remain mostly active. This investigation shows that these platforms' actions are insufficient to stop the misleading campaigns, highlighting the need for stronger rules and accountability.

- This campaign has been active for over two years across Meta and Google. It involves 35,000 **Facebook** ads from 1,500 pages and hundreds of Google ads that primarily promote unverified supplements.
- Many of these ads deceptively feature real doctors, celebrities, and logos from well-known pharmaceutical brands, endorsing products that can only be purchased through suspicious websites.
- Campaign tactics include website spoofing, fake reviews, and SEO manipulation, similar to techniques applied by Kremlin-linked disinformation campaigns like Doppelganger.
- While Meta and Google do remove ads, they often leave the advertisers' accounts active, which hinders transparency and allows for re-launches of deceptive ads. Both platforms lack ad budget transparency, making it difficult to assess the total ad spend. Google's ad library is limited and does not allow for keyword searches, complicating a thorough investigation.

Our Research Findings

What connects a certain Belarusian neurologist, Dr. Olga Sharapova, Spanish orthopedic surgeon Dr. Ramón Cugat, and German nutritionist Dr. Anne Fleck, among others? A recent large-scale online advertising campaign has featured images of them endorsing questionable supplements. Using professional titles and the likenesses of numerous medical professionals to lend apparent legitimacy to the ads, this campaign has circulated misleading ads across the EU, targeting a broad and diverse audience.

These scam ads promote various drugs alleging to treat numerous conditions, including diabetes, urinary incontinence, heart disease, and erectile dysfunction.

Key Takeaways:

- The campaign has been running for at least two years; our team has been tracking it closely for the past 11 months. The promotion runs through **Facebook** ads, Google ads, networks of interconnected websites targeting EU countries, and **YouTube** channels promoting the websites organically.
- Over 35,000 **Facebook** ads have been promoted by 1,500 pages, most of which are anonymous assets used solely for advertising.
- Hundreds of Google ads have been identified, and over 80 medical supplements have been promoted. These figures are likely much higher.
- The ads feature images of real individuals—primarily well-known medical doctors or celebrities—falsely endorsing dubious drugs available only online. They also feature the logos of well-known pharmaceutical companies in potential violation of intellectual property laws.
- Other campaign tactics include website spoofing, clickbait, fake patient reviews, and search engine optimization (SEO) boosts.
- The campaign shares tactics with known pro-Kremlin operations, such as Doppelganger. Networks of **Facebook** advertisers active on Doppelganger have been running ads promoting the dubious supplements. The campaign also uses tactics and assets that are common to other scam campaigns, such as **Facebook Hustlers**.
- Meta's response to the campaign is to remove the ads from the Ad Library while keeping the advertiser pages active, allowing these pages to run new ads from the campaign at any time. Deleting the ads also hampers research into the scope of the entire campaign. Meta currently does not disclose the budgets of these ads in the EU.
- The existence of such a campaign on Meta violates the platform's policy on Fraud, Scam, and Deceptive Practices regarding advertising misleading health practices, including the promotion of cures for specific diseases (e.g., diabetes), as well as using "sensationalist content [...] and clickbait tactics to make exaggerated or extreme health claims."
- Google's Ad Transparency Center makes identifying ads from this campaign challenging because it still lacks a keyword search function. Like Meta, Google also removes ads from this campaign, leaving advertisers active.

Modus Operandi & Campaign Tactics

Clickbait Catchphrases & Sensationalist Content

The advertising campaign uses clickbait tactics and sensationalist content to entice users to click on landing pages offering sales of dubious drugs. The ads often promote "efficient" home remedies for curing diseases, e.g., using garlic or bay leaf to treat parasites or cleanse blood

vessels. The ad creatives typically include image collages of various ingredients, photos of doctors, and well-known pharmaceutical brand logos from Bayer and Pfizer, implying their endorsement.

The ad copy typically avoids directly mentioning the medical supplements, instead focusing on natural methods, using clickbait-style headlines that promise quick recovery: "Urologists were stunned—prostatitis vanished in just one day" or "Two tablespoons a day cleanse blood vessels more effectively than any medication." A frequently used catchphrase—"Why are the pharmacies silent?"—suggests that pharmacies have no incentive to sell the drugs in physical locations, which is why they are primarily advertised online. This catchphrase appears in thousands of **Facebook** ads and is translated into all EU languages.



Figure 1: **Facebook** ads in German, Greek, and Italian using the clickbait catchphrase "Why are the pharmacies silent?". All ads reference natural methods for curing diseases. One ad written in Greek uses the Bayer logo, and Italian and German language ads feature Italian Prof. Matteo Bassetti, a specialist in infectious diseases, and German nutritionist Dr. Anne Fleck, allegedly endorsing questionable methods for curing prostatitis and circulatory problems. (Source: Screenshots from Meta Ad Library)



Figure 2: There are frequent mismatches between the impersonated doctors' nationality or medical specialty and the advertised drugs. For example, the image of Polish cardiologist Prof. Adam Torbicki appears in a Latvian language ad, while Belarusian neurologist Dr. Olga Sharapova's photo is used in a Spanish language ad for erectile dysfunction. In another instance, an English language ad uses a photo of British GP and TV presenter Rangan Chatterjee with the BBC logo to promote a video about an "innovative cure" for diabetes. Meta has since deleted the ads from its Ad Library archive. (Source: Screenshots from Meta Ad Library)

Suspicious Landing Pages & Website Spoofing

After clicking the ad, target audiences are redirected to landing pages advertising exclusive prices for the promoted supplements. The landing pages feature articles, often presenting stories of recovered patients or fabricated interviews with medical professionals endorsing the drugs. These pages usually imitate the design of media outlets and other popular websites in the target countries.

Website spoofing, creating fake websites that mimic legitimate sites, is used by malicious actors in large-scale disinformation operations like Doppelganger and scam campaigns such as Facebook Hustlers. These deceptive sites aim to mislead users, spread disinformation, or—in the case of scam campaigns—steal personal information such as emails or banking details. They are often hard to distinguish from the original websites at first glance, making them especially effective in deceiving unsuspecting visitors.

Figure 3: A misleading Bulgarian-language landing page, copying the design of the Bulgarian news website vesti.bg, promoting a drug for circulatory problems. The article tells the story of a Bulgarian centenarian who has extended her life thanks to a method for cleaning blood vessels. The story is allegedly endorsed by a Bulgarian cardiologist (right). Both photos were taken from a Russian website and show Russian individuals. (Source: Website screenshots 1, 2)

A Network of SEO Boosters

Outside the ads and landing pages, a large ecosystem of websites organically promotes the drugs. These sites operate in clusters and function as SEO boosters, increasing the visibility of the medicines in Google's search results. By acting as additional endorsements, they help further legitimize the products and enhance their credibility. Our initial investigation into the website clusters reveals that they consistently add fake reviews by patients and medical doctors using stolen photos of actual individuals.

We have tracked down a cluster of more than 230 coordinated websites promoting various drugs in more than 25 languages, including EU languages. The actual ecosystem of SEO-boosting websites is likely bigger and may include other coordinated clusters.

Fake Endorsement & Patient Reviews

Impersonating individuals is an essential tactic of the campaign. The photos of over 250 individuals have been used in the advertising images to create the illusion of public endorsement of the drugs. These include medical professionals across the EU and other public figures. Moreover, the landing pages promoting the supplements use images of fictitious patients and doctors sourced from various websites and featured in stories that claim the effectiveness of the drugs. Lastly, the SEO-boosting websites feature images of supposedly satisfied customers and patients who have used the drugs and inauthentic positive reviews. The images are taken from websites, authentic social media profiles, and stock photo libraries.

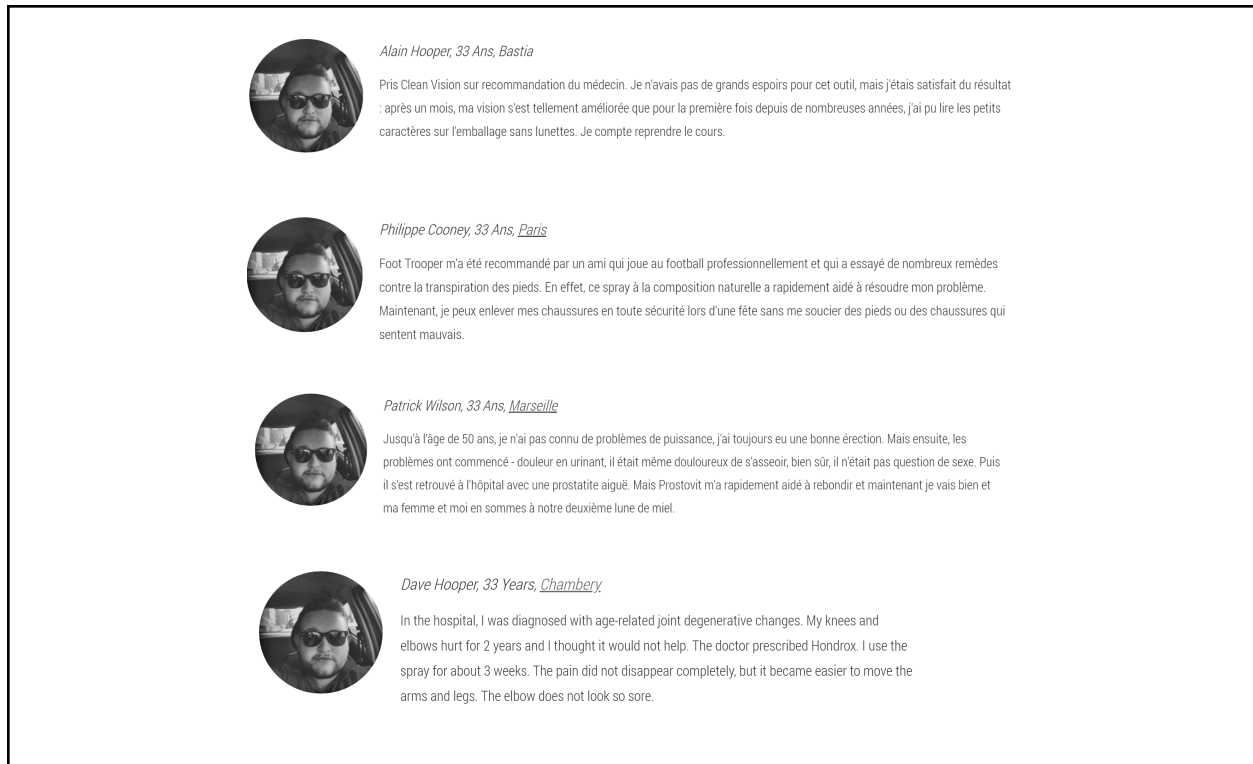


Figure 4: Screenshots of an inauthentic user review of a drug for treating joint pain. The same photo has been used on several other websites within the same network advertising medications for erectile dysfunction, feet sweating, and vision problems. In each review, the name and location of the patient vary. (Source: Website screenshots 1, 2, 3, 4)

An Army of Advertisers

We mapped 1,500 **Facebook** pages running 35,000 ads connected to this campaign, though the actual number of pages is even larger. Many of these pages are activated in coordinated clusters, showing similarities across several markers like common branding identities, usernames, contact information, admin locations, or creation dates. Most pages have few to no followers and show little to no organic activity aside from running ads. This suggests that the pages were likely created automatically to function as dormant advertising assets. Some identified advertisers belong to networks of latent advertisers that have run political ads in the EU, previously investigated by Reset Tech, including ads linked to the Kremlin Doppelganger operation.

Who Is Behind the Campaign?

Our initial investigation reveals that the administrators of many **Facebook** advertising pages are based in Estonia, Ukraine, Vietnam, and the Philippines. The clusters of websites promoting the supplements—whether as landing pages or SEO boosters—are operated from various locations, including Russia, Ukraine, and Estonia. Additionally, Google ads are being launched by advertisers from a range of countries, including EU nations. The diverse geographic

footprint suggests the campaign is either international in scope or multiple similar campaigns are being executed under a unified global strategy.

Platform Measures – A Band-Aid, Not a Cure

The advertising campaign has been active on Meta and Google throughout 2024 and has been running since at least 2022.

Despite clear indications of coordinated inauthentic behavior on Meta—such as clusters of similar pages running the same ads—the advertisers behind these pages have not been removed. Of the 1,500 advertiser pages we identified over the past 11 months, 88 percent remain active in September 2024 (approximately 1,300 pages). Meta only removes the advertisers with the highest ad count, while most other pages seem to be created solely to run a few ads before becoming dormant.

However, Meta systemically removes the ads linked to this campaign while keeping the pages active. Currently, 45 percent of the pages involved in this campaign, which have previously run ads, show no ads in the Ads Library section. This indicates that the platform has removed the ads but left the pages operational, thereby leaving them as assets that could potentially be used to run new ads in the future. This discrepancy raises significant transparency concerns and complicates any further investigation regarding the full extent of the campaign. Additionally, Meta does not reveal the budgets allocated for the ads, another transparency issue.

The current state of Google's Ad Library presents considerable challenges for a thorough investigation of the campaign. Unlike Meta, Google's Library does not allow keyword searches, making it challenging to identify the primary clickbait catchphrases associated with the campaign or search for advertised supplement names. Our investigation into Google's Ad Library is, as a result, limited; however, we note similar issues as with Meta: both platforms seem to remove ads associated with the campaign, yet neither consistently removes the advertisers' accounts, hence allowing them the opportunity to launch new ads.

Outlook and Further Steps

Our investigation into the campaign's scope is ongoing. We aim to address more questions regarding its outreach in the EU across various platforms and online assets. We are eager to share further insights as the investigation progresses. Please contact us if you have specific questions. Our [preliminary findings delivered at the 2024 EU DisinfoLab conference in Riga can be found here](#).

Contact Information

Find more information from this ongoing investigation here:

<https://www.reset.tech/resources/research-note-clickbait-cures-fake-meds-market/>

About the Organization

Reset Tech is a fully independent global enterprise with not-for-profit operations in North America, Europe, and Australia. The organization's mission is to guard against these digital threats to our security, safety, and fundamental rights. It seeks to “reset” the connection between media and democracy to restore the promise of technology that works for people and free expression. Visit [reset.tech](https://www.reset.tech) for more information.

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