A Psychological Approach to Understanding and Resisting the Influence of Advertising from the Pharmaceutical Industry

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the School of Psychology

July 2015
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Abstract

There is a growing concern that the marketing of pharmaceutical products exerts undue influence over healthcare professionals. However, there is a lack of empirical evidence to substantiate or refute this. Furthermore, the pharmaceutical industry’s marketing strategy has evolved to a two-pronged approach, incorporating consumer-directed marketing activities alongside the more traditional direct-to-physician marketing. In response, my thesis reports on two parallel lines of research that tackles each prong. In a series of randomised controlled experiments, I have 1) sought to provide more empirical evidence for the impact of pharmaceutical promotion on healthcare professionals and 2) evaluated an educational intervention developed to combat consumer-directed disease awareness advertisements disseminated by the pharmaceutical industry.

First, I attempted to replicate and advance Grande, Frosch, Perkins, and Kahn (2009)’s work by investigating whether exposure to pharmaceutical print advertising can shift medical students’ implicit attitude towards the advertised product, such that the individual exhibits a stronger positive association with the advertised product relative to a non-advertised product. Implicit attitudes were measured using an Implicit Association Test (IAT) designed to assess the strength of association between the advertised/non-advertised product and a list of positive/negative words. I could not replicate Grande and colleagues’ (2009) findings because of difficulties recruiting enough participants. A lack of statistical power meant that I could not make any inferences or draw any conclusions with confidence. However, the experiment did illuminate methodological issues associated with the IAT.

Next, I investigated the effectiveness of an educational intervention that informs the general public about industry-sponsored disease awareness campaigns and encourages the cultivation of healthy scepticism (i.e. having a critical eye when evaluating information) towards such potentially biased and misleading sources of health information. Specifically, I investigated the impact of this intervention on participants’ ability to identify the sponsor of a disease awareness advertisement, their attitudes towards such ads, their perceptions of the medical conditions discussed in the ads, their scepticism towards pharmaceutical advertising, and their behavioural intentions after viewing the ads. Across three experiments, I consistently demonstrated that the intervention increased participants’ sponsor identification accuracy and their scepticism towards pharmaceutical advertising. Healthy scepticism was consistently observed with regards to the perceived value of an ad. Participants who underwent the intervention were less likely to agree that an ad was valuable only when it was industry-sponsored. However, there was more inconsistency for measures, such as participants’ reported behavioural intentions, that required them to think through the implications of their attitude changes.
Declaration of Authorship

I, Brennan Ong, certify that this thesis titled, “A Psychological Approach to Understanding and Resisting the Influence of Advertising from the Pharmaceutical Industry” and the work presented in it contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of The University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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Date:  02/07/2015
Acknowledgements

Fifteen years ago, Dr. Candance Pert’s book, “Molecules of Emotion”, inspired an inquisitive teenager to pursue a career in science. It has been a long and arduous journey, but now I am at the cusp of fulfilling my childhood aspirations. My heartfelt gratitude goes to all who have helped me realise this dream.

First, I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr. Carolyn Semmler and Dr. Peter R. Mansfield. To Carolyn, for first illuminating to me the role psychology can play in understanding pharmaceutical advertising and its impact on medical decision making during an undergraduate lecture. That lecture begun our collaboration which led to this thesis. To Peter, I thank you for your insight and feedback over the years. I valued the non-psych perspective you provided and for cultivating the healthy sceptic in me.

I would like to thank Thomas Sullivan for educating me about Generalised Estimating Equations and Dr. Rachel Stephens for teaching me MATLAB and assisting me with the coding of my IAT. To Rachel, thank you for the mentor-ship you unknowingly bestowed upon me. I would also like to acknowledge the financial assistance the School of Psychology grants provided over the years, that facilitated participant recruitment and allowed me to discuss and present my work overseas. Pursuing a Ph.D. without a scholarship has been extremely trying and I appreciate all the assistance I received. In particular, I would like to thank Prof. Anna Chur-Hansen and Carolyn for their faith in me, putting their necks on the line to help me secure a completion scholarship for my final months of candidature. Furthermore, I would like to thank Anna for the support and guidance she has provided to me in the short time she has been Head of School.

Thanks to all my friends for helping me whenever I needed to pilot my studies. And thank you for the occasional non-so-subtle reminders that spurred me on to complete my thesis! To Joanne, you have been my rock. Thank you for your unwavering support and love. Our journey has had its highs and lows, but we’ve survived.

Last but not least, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my parents for their unconditional love and support. Dad, you are the best and I hope to be half as good a father as you have been to me. Mum, thank you for showering me with your tender loving care, particularly whenever I’m back in Singapore. To Bernice and Brenda, your bundles of joy have provided me with much needed escape and distraction – the best remedy to Ph.D. woes! I love you all ♥.