Dispelling the illusion of unique invulnerability: Cultivating healthy scepticism towards disease awareness advertisements

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The pharmaceutical industry skirts existing regulations that prohibit direct-to-consumer advertising by sponsoring disease awareness campaigns to engage the public. Consumers are, possibly, unaware that information from such campaigns may be biased. We report on an experiment that investigated the impact of an educational intervention on participants’ ability to identify the sponsor of a disease awareness advertisement (DAA), their attitudes towards the DAAs, their opinion on conditions discussed in the DAAs, their scepticism towards pharmaceutical advertising, and their behavioural intentions after viewing the DAAs. 113 participants, aged 18 to 58 years, were randomly assigned to an intervention or control group. Results indicated that intervention group participants had better odds of correctly identifying the sponsoring organisation compared to control group participants (OR = 3.09). Intervention group participants were more likely to regard DAAs as not valuable (OR = 5.84) and had greater scepticism towards pharmaceutical advertising (d = .38). Finally, intervention group participants perceived a disease as less severe than control group participants only when the DAA was non-independent (generalised eta-squared = .02). This research has important implications for understanding how to enhance the cognitive processes involved in evaluating persuasive messages from biased sources.