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HOLY PHARMA!

HEALTHISM DISCOURSES IN A PHARMACEUTICAL ADVERTISING WEBSITE

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Psychology

at Massey University, Albany, New Zealand

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2009

ABSTRACT

Modern changes in the public health philosophy and government legislation reflect a desire of health for all. The changes support a new healthism ideology that controls the experience and definition of health. Scholars parallel the function of healthism to that of a religion that meets the needs of a modern secular culture. This study examines a pharmaceutical advertising website, taking a social constructionist stance to investigate dominant representations of healthism and any parallels to the values and practices of Western religion. The website selected is published by a pharmaceutical marketing group that has been disseminating health and product information for 10 years. The installment of March-April 2009 was examined in its entirety. A critical discourse analytic approach drawing on Durkheim and Foucault was adopted to analyse texts, images, and videos. Particular attention was given to the similarities and differences of healthism and religion in terms, meanings, subject positioning and function. Results show healthism to parallel religion in its construction as information, instruction and ritual practice. The expert discourse within healthism promotes a morality that parallels and deviates from religious values with a turn toward the value of the self. This expert discourse informs healthism discourses, constructing a doctrine of unquestionable behaviours that legitimate ritualized health practices. When viewed as an integral entity, the form, content, and function of healthism in pharmaceutical advertising takes on the religious connectivity of values, beliefs and practices that underlies all social life. The website is an intense concentration of coercive and symbolic power to inform the institutionalized social system of healthism.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Kerry Chamberlain for his feedback and for offering me the opportunity to work on the incredibly talented and motivated medications team. I am grateful to Kerry as a wise and enthusiastic supervisor.

I also wish to thank my husband for his support and many sacrifices.

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Preface

The road to 'health' is paved with good intentions, and history is laden with health regimens conceptualized through the cultural the values of their time (Tulchinsky & Varavikova, 2009). Many of these regimens advocate altruistic intentions focused on safety and the promise of a 'good life' for those who adhere to specific practices (Crawford, 1980; Skrabanek, 1994). The most recent regimen is coined 'healthism' (Crawford, 1980, 2006). Upheld as the attainment of perfect 'health for all' (WHO, 1981), healthism is a powerful social practice inextricably bound to medicalisation and the intensity of consumerism driven by a neo-liberal agenda (Crawford, 1980; Greenhalgh & Wessely, 2004). Scholars parallel the function of healthism to that of a religion (Conrad, 2007; Schaler, 2002), positioning its practices as offering a new value system to meet the needs of a modern secular culture (Skrabanek, 1994).

Healthism has the potential to expand as a global ideology via a road paved by media advertising that promotes the attainment of health through the consumption of services and products (Crawford, 1980, 2006). The potential advancement of healthism is robust in New Zealand as one of only two countries in the OECD that allows direct-to-consumer advertising (DTCA) (Toop et al., 2003). However, national boundaries cannot contain advertising due to the global accessibility of the Internet (Murero & Rice, 2006; Richardson, 2005). The road to health is now an information superhighway.