

Cause-Marketing and Breast Cancer: The Efficacy
of Pinkwashing in the United States

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Companies that sell “pink products,” committing a portion of proceeds to cancer funds, often also sell carcinogenic products. Only a small fraction of the money raised goes towards cancer research or treatment. Such cause-marketing is called “pinkwashing” which has grown more conspicuous over the course of the 21st century. Pink ribbons, an international symbol of breast cancer awareness, were first associated with breast cancer in 1990 when Charlotte Haley distributed peach-colored ribbons attached to note cards to alert citizens that only a small percentage the National Cancer Institute’s annual budget went towards cancer prevention (Burke, 1992). *Self* magazine approached Haley about using her ribbons for a breast cancer awareness issue. When she refused on the grounds of commercialism, *Self* switched to pink to avoid legal trouble (National Film Board of Canada, 2011). Pink ribbons were quickly adopted by breast cancer charities and other organizations and are still used today, especially in October, which is National Breast Cancer Awareness Month in the United States. “Pinkwashing” was coined by Breast Cancer Action (BCA), an activist organization, in its “Think Before You Pink” campaign in 2002. It claims that pinkwashing is a form of social injustice. Its members consider themselves “watchdogs” for those at risk (Think Before You Pink). While some believe that pink products bring awareness to a devastating disease and raises money put to good use, others think that the practice exploits a vulnerable group of people for profit without benefitting the cause. This balance between awareness and exploitation is precarious, but doable. Pinkwashing was and can continue to be a beneficial economic partnership for everyone as long as companies and charities are transparent about their doings. If companies’ products contain carcinogens, they should be

labeled on the packaging. Businesses and charities should also be open about what funds raised are being spent on. Overall, an honest approach would be the most beneficial, because if consumers decide their money is better spent or donated somewhere else, they can choose to do so in this United States market economy.

Review of Research

A variety of causes have been utilized for cause-marketing. One that has been investigated the most is greenwashing, a marketing tactic to convince consumers that a company's products, production methods, or policies are more environmentally friendly than they truly are. There are several reasons why this has been allowed to occur. Nonmarket drivers include lax regulation on the subject and pressure from activists, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the media to be environmentally conscious. Market drivers include demand from both consumers and investors and competitive pressure (Delmas, 2011). Dr. Nancy Furlow writes "marketers must recognize that simply stating your environmental correctness is not enough – you must be true to your green" (2010).

Many medical professionals have criticized breast cancer cause-marketing. At an OncLive Conference, Patrick Borgen, MD, said: "The downside of pinkwashing is that it perpetuates a number of myths about how common breast cancer is, how curable it is," which can weaken breast cancer campaigns (OncLive, 2012). Breast cancer kills tens of thousands of women every year and chemotherapy and surgery leave women feeling extreme pain and discomfort. Meanwhile, many advertising campaigns with bright pink colors and smiling, youthful actors imply that cancer is not as threatening as it is. While individuals may have no impact on multimillion-dollar corporations and their marketing tactics, medical associations are

more influential. The American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) condemned pinkwashing in its 2018 alcohol and cancer statement, and urged beverage companies to refrain from using breast cancer symbols to market their products (LoConte, 2018). In an interview, LoConte said “It's sort of like selling cigarettes to raise lung cancer awareness—it just doesn't make a lot of sense” (Chahal, 2018).

Carcinogenic-Containing Products

A wide range of products and companies utilize the pink ribbon to either raise awareness of or funds for breast cancer; some include or are associated with known carcinogens. By selling products that contribute to cancer, companies are hypocritical in their actions and the effectiveness of their contributions to research and awareness is diminished.

One peculiar instance of pinkwashing is Baker Hughes’ pink drill bits (fig. 1). Baker Hughes is a Texas-based fracking and oil company that produced and distributed 1,000 pink drill bits and donated \$100,000 to Susan G. Komen. In a press release from Baker Hughes (which is no longer available on their website) it said the pink drill bits served “as a reminder of the



Figure 1: Baker Hughes breast cancer awareness pink drill bits manufactured in 2014. It also contributed \$100,000 to Susan G. Komen (NBC News, 2014).

importance of supporting research, treatment, screening, and education to help find the cures for this disease” (NBC News, 2014). Many people were not pleased that Komen accepted the donation because chemicals used in fracking have been linked to cancer. Benzene, when

inhaled, has shown increased likelihood of developing various forms of leukemia or other blood disorders and immunological effects (McKenzie, 2012). Other air pollutants, such as silica particulates, can lead to lung cancer, kidney disease, and autoimmune diseases, among other complications (Adgate, 2014). On Facebook, Susan G. Komen made a post supporting Baker Hughes' decision to support breast cancer, but the majority of the comments were negative (Susan G. Komen, 2014). BCA executive director Karuna Jaggar responded to the partnership: "With all the toxic chemicals Baker Hughes is pumping into the ground, we thought they didn't care about women's health. However, this partnership with Komen makes it clear where both organizations stand on this issue," (Breast Cancer Action, 2014).

Another partnership that Susan G. Komen formed was with Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC). Beginning in 2010, KFC began to sell chicken in pink buckets pledging to donate 50¢ from each bucket sold (fig. 2). In that year, KFC raised over \$4.2 million, the largest donation to Susan G. Komen in its history



(Kentucky Fried Chicken, 2010). Customers and critics alike believed it to be a strange pairing because obesity is one of the greatest factors in increasing cancer risk, including breast cancer. In both African American and European American women, risk of breast cancer increased with increased intake of energy-dense foods, fast foods, and sugary drinks independent of age and tumor type (Chandran, 2014). That is why the World Cancer Research Fund, among other

professional medical organizations, recommend people “limit consumption of fast foods and other processed foods high in fat, starches, or sugars” (World Cancer Research Fund, 2019).

Transparency of Donations and Their Distribution

Companies that raise money for breast cancer sometimes do not disclose their monetary contributions, and those that do often hide the details in fine print. One common practice is to set a cap, and product purchases up to that amount contribute to the donation while those purchased after the goal is reached are fully profited upon by companies. This strategy is dishonest, and if firms and charities cared about ending breast cancer, they would be more transparent about where the money goes.

Beginning in 1998 in its “Save Lids to Save Lives” campaign, Yoplait urged customers to mail in pink yogurt lids to donate 10 cents to the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation. It advertised the campaign on television, in print, and on other General Mills products (Dahlsad, 2017; Display Ad 482, 1999). In a television advertisement in the 2000’s, the narrator said that the maximum donation from lids is \$500,000 plus an additional \$750,000 guaranteed. Yet, this information was missing from the lids themselves. Postage was about 40 cents throughout most of the decade, apart from the cost of an envelope (USPS, 2019). A consumer, would have to mail seven lids to donate more than mailing cost. It may have been more convenient to send the donation directly to the charity. Critics noted that the yogurt was made with milk containing synthetic recombinant bovine growth hormone (rBGH) to stimulate milk production in cows (General Mills, 2009). The American Cancer Society has not taken a stand on whether rBGH is a carcinogen; the research is inconclusive (ACS, 2014). Starting in 2012, select Yoplait product lids could be redeemed online, eliminating the need for postage (General Mills, 2012).

La Mer, a high-end cosmetics company operating under The Estée Lauder Companies is transparent about its maximum donation. It sells “Breast Cancer Campaign Treatment Lotion” for \$110, promising “La Mer will donate 20% from the purchase price of this Limited Edition, travel-size Treatment Lotion with a maximum donation of \$53,000 to the Breast Cancer Research Foundation” (La Mer, n.d.-a). At \$22, the donation is larger than for most pink products. But the company will reach its donation cap after selling just over 2,400 bottles of lotion. Estée Lauder and La Mer combined generated about \$6.5 billion in skin care net sales for the 2019 fiscal year (Estée Lauder, 2019). Treatment Lotion is one of Le Mer’s best-selling product with annual sales likely exceeding 2,400 bottles (La Mer, n.d.-b); the donation period is about nine months. After reaching the cap, La Mer retains all profits from the lotion. However, companies often don’t reveal their final donation until the donation period has ended, so consumers purchasing the lotion will not know whether their purchase contributed to the donation.

Since the pink ribbon is not trademarked, it can be used by any individual or organization. It does not even have to imply that any money involved will be donated to the cause. While the ribbon began as an awareness campaign symbol, it is now used by companies to profit off of those who are unaware of this detail. For instance, there are thousands of products that litter websites such as Amazon or Walmart that make no mention of donating any proceeds to fight breast cancer. On the Walmart website, there are 1,008 results for “breast cancer awareness shirts,” none of which mention any donation being made to breast cancer treatment or research, let alone further awareness (Walmart, n.d.). However, among the reviews of one t-shirt, a customer named Sam wrote “Wear to bed or with sweats. Anything that supports this research and is cute comfortable gets my vote” and gave the shirt five stars (Sam, 2019). They believed

that a portion of their purchase went to breast cancer research, but they are likely mistaken. This suggests that many of those who purchase these sorts of products believe that they are contributing to the cause.

The Pink Ribbon and Breast Cancer

As with most disease-related movements, breast cancer has chosen pink as its representative color, likely because it predominantly affects women. Pink has developed a somewhat negative connotation over the last century that reflects badly on those who suffer from the disease as well as the severity of cancer itself.

Colors are associated with socio-cultural constructs such as gender, socioeconomic status, and most recently sexual orientation. In Western culture, pink is typically associated with girls and women while blue is with boys and men. However, this was not always the case. Only until the 1920s was the color pink associated with baby boys rather than girls. Pale red (pink) was used to symbolize blood and fighting while light blue is the color of the Virgin Mary. Only during the First World War is when blue began to associate with masculine professions, particularly the navy. To maintain the gender color dichotomy, pink was associated with girls. Since then, the gay community has also adopted pink as a representative color, where a different variety of cause-marketing referred to as pinkwashing has evolved. There has also been a post-feminist movement to reembrace pink as an empowering color rather than one of dependence and meekness (Koller, 2008). Dr. Lisa Wagner (2005) wrote:

When comparing breast cancer to other health threats to women, it is easy to regard breast cancer as a complex disease that not only affects the physical wellbeing of the afflicted, but also affects one's body image, femininity and sexuality. By connecting the disease to the color pink, one can reinforce notions of femininity, health and youthfulness. Thus, breast cancer is portrayed in a hopeful light.

In disagreement, however, Gayle Sulik, the author of *Pink Ribbon Blues: How Breast Cancer Culture Undermines Women's Health* (2012), writes:

The color pink signifies the innocence and sometimes childishness, nurturance, emotional sensitivity, and selflessness associated with traditional femininity... Inscribing breast cancer survivorship, support, and awareness activities with pink femininity draws upon and reactivates societal gender expectations.

Of course, color preference varies among individuals. Women who love pink may embrace this association head on. Those who do not dread being confronted with the color so often. Marie Arsenault, a metastatic breast cancer patient, recounts her thoughts on seeing pink products frequently: "They don't make sense I mean anybody can put a pink ribbon on the package and say ... and they don't say anything" (DePolo, 2015). Opinions such as this are frequently observed online, so it goes without saying that many breast cancer patients and survivors feel overwhelmed with the number of pink products they encounter.

Not many businesses utilize pink in their branding because it is so strongly associated with femininity. Some notable ones include Barbie, Victoria's Secret, and Cosmopolitan, all products targeted at girls or women. Companies likely use the splash of pink of the ribbon to vary their usual branding. Associating with a cause has also proven fruitful for many brands. By utilizing cause-related marketing, brands tend to enhance their image from the point of view of their consumers. In regards to conditional donations, where a fraction of purchase is donated rather than a flat amount, a study found that "there is little downside for a firm that engages in CRM". Unconditional donations were perceived as more altruistic than conditional donations for businesses of any reputation (Dean, 2003). Women have also been shown to donate and donate more than men (Mesch, 2011). This has led to breast cancer being one of the most overfunded cancers compared to societal cost, years of life lost, and number of deaths, potentially "due to the

deep psychological importance and sense of identity women attach to their breasts” (Carter, 2012).

The Meaning of “Breast Cancer Awareness”

Until recent history, cancer was a taboo subject that people felt they need to hide. Therefore, treatment and research were put by the wayside and those who suffered were disregarded in society. Most people are aware of breast cancer in the 21st century and attention should be focused on research regarding prevention and treatment of breast cancer.

The origins of the Breast Cancer Awareness movement can be traced to the Women’s Health movement of the 1970’s in the United States. When women, including writer Babette Rosmond and journalist Rose Kushner, were diagnosed with breast cancer, they were confronted by doctors who were only willing to perform radical mastectomies, which remove the entire breast as well as surrounding lymph nodes and chest wall muscles. They began to publish their stories to educate other women that they have a say in the procedures performed on their bodies. Rosmond wrote “I said ‘no’ to a group of doctors who told me, ‘You must sign this paper, you don’t have to know what it’s all about’” (Campion, 1975). They both emphasized that for small localized tumors, a lumpectomy, rather than a mastectomy, and adjuvant radiation would suffice and reduce disfigurement and complications (Kushner, 1977). Today, lumpectomies are the standard of care for early-stage cancers. Around the same time, public figures such as Shirley Temple Black, first lady Betty Ford, and second lady Margaretta “Happy” Rockefeller went public with their diagnoses. Black wrote “The doctor can make the incision; I’ll make the decision” (Black, 1973). These public displays of women taking control over what occurs to their bodies changed the future of breast cancer discussions, treatments, and funding permanently.

As breast cancer charities began to form and in the 1990s adopt the pink ribbon, it became branded everywhere. Today, most people associate the pink ribbon with Susan G. Komen, the largest and best-funded breast cancer organization in the United States. It adopted the color pink upon its inception in 1982, and as of 2007 the logo is an abstract representation of a runner made out of a pink ribbon (Susan G. Komen, n.d.-a). Susan G. Komen's largest fundraising events are their Race For the Cure runs that are held throughout the year and according to SGK, the series of such events "raises significant funds and awareness for the breast cancer movement, celebrates breast cancer survivorship and honors those who have lost their battle with the disease" (Susan G. Komen, n.d.-b). How the funds are spent may not be specified prior to or at the runs, but according to Susan G. Komen's Consolidated Statement of Activities for the 2018 fiscal year, of \$153,385,258 raised, only \$32,295,812 was spent on research: just over 21% of all expenses. Even less was spent on health screening and treatment services. The vast majority went to public health education (Susan G. Komen, 2018). The two most costly categories within public health education are Marketing and Communications (\$38,612,336) followed by Salaries and Benefits (\$21,925,010). To whom these salaries are paid is not disclosed, but they are likely not medical professionals or scientists contributing to cancer treatments or research.

Most of the are allocated to education or awareness. But what constitutes an awareness campaign? One of the most recognizable is National Breast Cancer Awareness month in October each year in the US, when charities partner with companies to sell pink products, wear pink, or otherwise associate themselves with breast cancer. For example, the National Football League (NFL) equips its players in pink sports gear and paints a giant pink ribbon in the center of many fields. One of its messages for years had been to promote yearly mammograms for women at risk

of breast cancer. For example, in 2015, the NFL's official Twitter posted "Annual screening saves lives. Remind family & friends to make a crucial catch: NFL.com/pink 3NFLPink" (NFL, 2015). With only 123 retweets and 215 likes, this was not a successful post. Also, a majority of the replies comment on the disapproval of the league to let Pittsburgh Steelers running back DeAngelo Williams wear pink all season long. Contrary to the NFL's tweet, research has proven that yearly mammograms are not suitable for all women due to the high prevalence of both false negatives and positives as well as, albeit small, exposure to x-ray radiation overtime. Also, clinical breast exams are no longer recommended (Oeffinger, 2015). Jaggar wrote in an op-ed "By picking a "popular" cause, rather than something actually relevant to the league like violence against women, the NFL throws a smokescreen over the fire of sexism, misogyny and objectification of women raging in its own backyard," (2014). Beginning in 2017, the NFL transitioned from focusing on only breast cancer to highlighting many cancers. The program titled Crucial Catch partners with the American Cancer Society to promote its tool The Defender, aimed at providing "personalized tips on how to reduce your risk of cancer" (NFL, n.d.).

Conclusion

While the women's health movement, including women's cancer awareness, began with honorable intentions, the pink ribbon has become commercialized far beyond anyone's expectations. With an entire month, a color, and countless fundraisers, charity events, and donations attributed to the disease, breast cancer has been integrated into everyday life. No longer does "awareness" need to occur because a majority of Western culture is fully aware that the disease exists. Money needs to fund treatments and research now more than ever. In addition, breast cancer is the most prevalent, but by far not the deadliest. Lung cancer kills the most

people in the US, estimated at killing more than three times that of breast cancer (American Cancer Society, 2019). Other cancers deserve the attention that breast cancer has been getting the last 30 years since the creation of the pink ribbon

Is a pink ribbon symbol inherently bad? No. But its misuse by those who expose the population to unnecessary carcinogens is shameful and should be regulated. A potential form of regulation that would be ideal is tripartism. Proposed by Ayres and Braithwaite, it is the “integration of a third party into the regulatory arena occupied by an organization and a regulator” (Ayres, 1991; Laufer, 2003). In this instance, a nongovernment organization (NGO) would regulate the use of the pink ribbon. Suggested regulation should include prohibiting the use of carcinogens in pink products or enforcing carcinogen labeling, evaluating the transparency of information regarding donation amounts and distribution, and so on. This would be more feasible than assigning ownership of the symbol since a trademark would limit its availability to a single entity. This form of governance of the pink ribbon would be a step in the right direction in managing misleading marketing tactics and protecting the dignity of those who cannot speak up for themselves against big business.

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