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# Cashing in on the Pink Ribbon

Soleil Young



**D**r. Olufunmilayo Olopade, director of the Cancer Risk Clinic at the University of Chicago, commented on Breast Cancer Awareness Month: “It’s a great thing that women are more aware, but awareness is different from actually doing something about it.” There is perhaps no more accurate quote to describe the overall publicity surrounding breast cancer. It is hard to turn anywhere during October without seeing some kind of commercial product or organization sporting a pretty pink ribbon

and touting its support of breast cancer research. The topic of breast cancer, an issue over which women took to the streets in the 1990s, has become comfortably entrenched in the culture of corporations and the mainstream media. Corporations have taken control of the public discourse on breast cancer and have become an essential part of the news abuse that focuses the conversation on the harmless, “feminine” side of the disease. This in turn promotes misogynistic ideals and channels women’s anger into consum-

erism. The media and corporations can easily twist breast cancer awareness to support post-feminist ideas and “hipster sexism,” while enlarging their profits.

Since its inception, the pink ribbon has been a corporate symbol. It was first used to stand for breast cancer awareness and prevention by the makeup conglomerate Estée Lauder in the 1990s. Charlotte Haley, who worked for the National Cancer Institute and had begun a peach ribbon campaign to raise awareness about how little research was being done on cancer prevention, was approached by the Estée Lauder Corporation, which wanted to use her ribbon on its products. She refused, and the company decided to use a ribbon of a different color instead to get around the issue of legal ownership. After Estée Lauder carried out focus group testing, the company found that pink was the color to which women responded most, as they found it to be the most comforting, reassuring, and nonthreatening color (*Pink Ribbons, Inc.*). The campaign worked, and according to the film *Pink Ribbons, Inc.*, this was the first instance of a corporation’s engaging in the kind of product-related “philanthropy” wherein partial donations from the sale of a product go to support some cause. Since this first pink ribbon campaign, many other companies have begun to do the same thing, most also using the pink ribbon. The fact that the issue of breast cancer “awareness” became popularized in this way reflects how well the topic was manipulated by corporations and the media to serve their own interests.

The use of breast cancer as “cause marketing”—partnering between profit business and non-profit organizations—is most obvious in the shady dealings involving research money that is raised in relation to breast cancer. When you buy a “pink ribbon” product, there is often no guarantee of how much money (if any) is being given to “research,”

what kind of research it’s going to pay for, or what organization will receive the funds. According to the Think Before You Pink organization, any company can put a pink ribbon on its products, “as the pink ribbon is not regulated by any agency.” The organization cites as an example the Dansko Shoe Company, which in 2010 promoted the sale of “pink ribbon” clogs. Dansko’s implication that it would donate money from the sale of the clogs to breast cancer research was in fact false, as it had already set aside a \$25,000 donation for the Susan G. Komen Foundation for the Cure that did not rely upon the sale of the shoes. Even if a company does donate part of the proceeds from the sale of a product to breast cancer research, the dollar amount might be very small (for instance, Yoplait encouraged consumers to send in the cap from a Yoplait yogurt cup and then donated five cents for each cap received), or there might be a limit on the proceeds donated. Many breast cancer activists and feminists have been particularly critical of companies using consumers’ purchases to fund breast cancer-related donations, claiming that it is easier and more worthwhile to have people simply send in a \$10 check to an organization (*Pink Ribbons, Inc.*). Instead, companies use the cause of breast cancer awareness as a way to convince people to buy their product as opposed to that of a competitor. It’s a classic oligopoly marketing strategy in which a brand creates an image or promotes itself in order to lure buyers.

An offshoot issue arising from this corporatization is the misuse of research funds. Most Americans think of “research” as a blanket term and assume the money dedicated to it is being put to good use. As Barbara A. Brenner, executive director of Breast Cancer Action of San Francisco, noted in *Pink Ribbons, Inc.*, the notion that throwing money at a problem will fix it is a very capitalistic

approach, a “quick fix we have come to expect,” and it contributes to our expectation that we will “win” by donating as much money as possible. Most foundations like to tout the amount of money they have donated/raised (e.g., “The Susan G. Komen Foundation has raised more than \$1.9 billion in the fight against breast cancer,” as the organization’s Web page says). It’s odd if one considers the fact that these companies are not publicizing what has been accomplished with the research money.

In truth, most research is done on pharmaceutical products (*Pink Ribbons, Inc.*), drugs aimed at prolonging the lives of patients (sometimes just by a few weeks), and only 3% of research funds are put towards prevention and the study of causation. We know very little about breast cancer except that there are five or six (or maybe more) different types, and each behaves differently. This makes treating the disease very difficult, and no treatment works for everyone. As Dr. Susan Love, who has done extensive research on breast cancer, pointed out in *Pink Ribbons, Inc.*, many HIV/AIDS drug advances came about after

scientists understood the pathology and etiology of the disease. By attempting to simply “slash, burn and poison” cancer instead of understanding it, researchers are misusing funds. This may benefit pharmaceutical companies, though, and as long as there are no real strides in treating breast cancer and nobody asks what is being gained through the use of research funds, the companies can continue to exploit breast cancer for profit.

Ironically enough, companies that support breast cancer “awareness” and “research” may well be contributing to the rise in prevalence of the disease. “Pinkwashing” (a term coined by cancer advocacy group Breast Cancer Action, an organization dedicated to supporting those with breast cancer and emphasizing breast cancer as a public health problem) refers to a phenomenon in which companies like Avon (and even, in one instance, the Susan G. Komen Foundation) that claim to support breast cancer awareness actually use carcinogens or suspected carcinogens in their products. Instances include such use in

Yoplait products (Yoplait eventually stopped using it after Think Before You Pink started a letter and email campaign against its use). The number of companies that do something simi-

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lar is astounding, but as long as they control how breast cancer is discussed, the public will never realize the extent of the problem. Pink-washing, the misuse of research funds, and the corporatization of breast cancer are all forms of news abuse that companies use to create the prevalent “pink ribbon culture” (*Pink Ribbon, Inc.*) we associate with breast cancer and control the conversation about it for the purpose of making money.

The “pink ribbon culture” created by corporations is damaging both to women with breast cancer, especially Stage IV, and women without the disease. It perpetrates misogynistic stereotypes and deflects anger by perpetuating ideas about how women should behave, which in turn channels anger and potential activism into something mundane. The most obvious of these issues is the use of misogynistic and sexist phrases and ideas in the marketing of “breast cancer awareness.” The “I Love Boobies” campaign, which was launched in 2004 by the Keep A Breast Foundation and has been reported as selling over a million bracelets (Keep A Breast Foundation), is one of the most prevalent among young people. According to its mission statement, the program “puts the message of shame-free breast awareness in the global spotlight” (Keep A Breast Foundation). A campaign image urging people to get involved features a woman clutching her breasts while holding an “I Love Boobies” flag. One of the foundation’s “art” projects, featured on its website, is painted women’s plaster torsos lacking any heads or legs, showcasing only breasts. Feminists take issue with the campaign because it encourages the sexualization of a serious issue and the reduction of women to simply the parts of them that the media find sexy.

Perhaps Tracy Clark-Flory says it best when she writes that the campaign “simplifies the fight against breast cancer as a fight to save breasts. Not people, but breasts”

(“Why I Do Not Heart Boobies”). Similar “awareness” campaigns such as “Save the Ta-Tas” T-shirts, a commercial featuring bouncing bikini-clad breasts, and a website called the “Booby Wall” that collects pictures of breasts in an effort to raise awareness (Clark-Flory, “Boobs to Cure Cancer?”) are all problematic for the same reason. They objectify women and paint the fight against breast cancer as a fight to save breasts. Recently, a gossip site whose slogan is “Because Men Think Differently” reported on a celebrity photo shoot featuring models lounging naked in bathtubs. The story began with, “You know nobody loves breasts more than I do...we don’t just admire, leer, and ogle, we also need to preserve, protect, and defend”(Swift). It is a blatantly sexist ad, perhaps the worst offender of all the campaigns mentioned here. The campaigns don’t really care about women if they are reduced to using misogynistic and sexist phrases and slurs, thus helping perpetuate the idea that women are merely sex objects and the idea that the sadness of a death from breast cancer or even a mastectomy is solely due to the loss of the woman’s “boobies.”

As mentioned earlier, the color pink was specifically chosen to represent breast cancer because women found it the most comforting, reassuring, and non-threatening color. Traditionally, women have been viewed as nurturers, expected to be happy and cheerful all the time, and this is an essential factor contributing to the marginalization of women. Charlene Elliot, Ph.D., argues that pink ribbons piggyback on this general warm and fuzzy sentimentality around pink and thus present breast cancer awareness as a comforting thing (*Pink Ribbons, Inc.*). The “cult of domesticity”-inspired attitude toward women is prevalent in almost every aspect of breast cancer awareness, prevention, and research organizations as well as in how the media

portrays them and their events. Rhetoric and stories in the breast cancer community are often intended to be uplifting, featuring women with the disease who remained cheerful and positive throughout the horrible ordeals they had to go through. This, in a sense, marginalizes anger, and the corporations and organizations involved are fully aware of this. In *Pink Ribbons, Inc.*, Nancy Brinker, head of the Susan G. Komen Foundation for the Cure, admitted that perhaps the organization was putting a “pretty pink ribbon” on things, but claimed that this was in some ways good, as she felt that anger did not motivate people to support a cause for the long term. Unfortunately, this assessment does not take into account anti-colonial movements, the Civil Rights Movement, the feminist movement, anti-racism movements, and many other movements that have been able to combine anger with hope and optimism. By completely writing off anger, the Komen Foundation (which is the largest and best-known breast cancer–related foundation) is in a sense able to discourage activism. In fact, in the early 1990s, a plethora of protests led by women over the growing epidemic that was breast cancer (*Pink Ribbons, Inc.*) constituted the

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main discourse on breast cancer awareness, prevention, and other issues surrounding the disease. Barbara A. Brenner of Breast Cancer Action San Francisco, who actively participated in these protests, feels that the main effect of the “whole pink ribbon culture” was “to drain and deflect the kind of militancy we had as women who were appalled to have a disease that was an epidemic and yet we don’t even know the cause of” (*Pink Ribbons, Inc.*).

The discouragement of anger and activism related to breast cancer is part of a larger goal by the media and the patriarchy as a whole to silence women and stop feminist activism. This effort is part of the media’s post-feminist agenda, an ideological backlash against the feminist movements of the 1970s and beyond. A study by Media Report to Women discusses an NBC Universal initiative called “Women’s Week” and the fact that most coverage seemed to stress the ways in which women’s individual choices had negatively impacted work and family life (Schowalter). NBC and others stress that most

women’s problems seem to stem from their lack of presence in the home, but they say this in a way that is difficult to clearly identify as sexism because it lets us feel “like we are beyond low-level, obvious humiliation of women” (Quart). It’s sexism that consists of the objectification of women, but using

mockery, quotation marks, and paradox, and it includes women “ironically” posing for the male gaze (as in most American Apparel ads); the success of sexually abusive, creepy, and yet very popular photographer Terry Richardson; and popular TV shows using misogynistic language like “slut” and “skank.” It also involves the touting of partial feminist victories such as the outlawing of discrimination against women in hiring decisions while a blind eye is turned to the fact that such discrimination still happens and that women, especially women of color, still earn less than men. This phenomenon affects not just news stations like Fox, but also more liberal newspapers such as the *New York Times*, which in 2005 ran a story with the headline “Voices from a Post-Feminist Generation” (Fudge).

The Media Report to Women also discussed another of NBC Universal’s Women’s Week goals, stating that the network attempted to start a conversation, but focused on issues and segments that in the end only led to a discussion of “new time-saving products.” Because women make 80% of family buying decisions and yet advertisers have historically had a hard time connecting with them (*Pink Ribbons, Inc.*), the whole week was really a hidden opportunity for corporations and news companies to make money and further their post-feminist ideas.

The fact that pink ribbon breast cancer awareness products are easily marketable to women, along with the fact that the rhetoric created by companies discourages activism among women, makes breast cancer the perfect issue for media companies to focus on and promote. This is why it has exploded and become so widely covered. It is unlikely that corporations and the media will ever alter the way they talk about breast cancer without widespread societal calls for change. The way we talk about breast cancer is flawed, but pointing this out and trying to do something

that actually helps women with breast cancer (by trying to figure out what is causing this epidemic and letting them feel their anger) won’t sell products, it won’t deter women from protesting, and it won’t use misogynistic language and ideas that promote the media’s post-feminist views.

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