

“It’s For a Good Cause”: The Semiotics of the Pink Ribbon for Breast Cancer in Print Advertisements

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Abstract

This paper, examines the history, composition, and performativity of the pink ribbon in the global campaign of breast cancer awareness and prevention. First, the paper trace the contemporary use of the ribbon to an American folk legend and shows how the ribbon’s meaning evolved from a personal message of forgiveness to an internationally recognized metaphor of social awareness. Next, it explores the relationship between the color pink and the ribbon and explains how print advertisements incorporate these and other signifiers in their promotion of company products and the breast cancer cause. Finally, it discusses the success enjoyed by the breast cancer campaign in cause advertising and highlights the international exposure that the pink breast cancer ribbon has received.

The History of the Ribbon in U.S. Contemporary Society

According to the American Folk Life Center (Parsons, 1991), the common custom of wearing, decorating with, or displaying ribbons for social causes began with a folk legend. In his (1959) book on prison reform, Curtis Bok writes about a story told to him by Kenyon J. Scudder, first superintendent of Chico Penitentiary. The story relates the tale of two men on a train, one of whom was a convict returning home after serving a five-year prison sentence at a distant facility. While he was incarcerated, the convict’s family could not afford to make the trip to visit him and they were also uneducated and unable to write. Hence, shortly before his release from prison, the convict wrote to them to make a sign for him: If they wanted him to come home, they were to place a white ribbon in the big apple tree next to the railroad track, and he would get off the train. If he didn’t see a white ribbon in the designated apple tree, he would stay on the train and seek a new life elsewhere. As the train approached the apple tree, the ex-convict told his traveling companion he couldn’t bear to look. His companion said that he would look and took his place by the window to watch for the apple tree: He saw an apple tree covered with white ribbons!

In his 1971 article for the *New York Post* “Going Home”, Pete Hammill relates a legend about a group of college students on a bus trip to Fort Lauderdale who make friends with an ex-convict. The ex-convict is watching for a yellow handkerchief on a roadside oak tree. The story was reprinted in the June 1972 issue of *Reader’s Digest* and was made into a dramatic made for television movie by ABC-TV in this same month. Later in the summer of 1972, Irwin Levine and L. Russell Brown registered the song “Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the ‘Ole Oak Tree,” sighting its origin as a story they heard while in the military. In 1975,

Gail Magruder, wife of convicted Watergate participant, Jeb Stuart Magruder, decorated her porch with yellow ribbons to welcome her husband home when he was released from prison. This historical timeline illustrates how an American folk legend was transformed into a popular song, which in turn was transformed into a ritual performative. On November 4, 1979, Penne Laingen extended the notion of performativity and the yellow ribbon by creating an emblem for the return of an imprisoned hero. Penne Laingen's husband, Ambassador Bruce Laingen, and other embassy staff were taken hostage, as Iranian revolutionaries seized the American Embassy in Tehran. Penne tied a yellow ribbon around her old oak tree and vowed to leave it there until her husband came home to untie it himself. The December 10, 1979, issue of the *Washington Post* contained two articles written by Barbara Parker, "Coping with Iragé" (Parker, 1979a) and "Penne Laingen's Wait" (Parker, 1979b), in which Penne Laingen's act of tying a yellow ribbon around an oak tree was offered as a medium families could use to express their determination to be reunited with their loved ones being held hostage. The families of the hostages met and formed an association called the *Family Liaison Action Group* (FLAG). They chose the yellow ribbon as their symbol and soon linked themselves to other humanitarian organizations, one of which was a group called *No Greater Love*. Aided by four *American Federation of Labor and Civil Liberties Organization* (AFL-CIO) unions, *No Greater Love* and FLAG made and distributed ten thousand yellow ribbon pins to several different social groups, including union members, hostage family members, college students and TV weather forecasters. During the time of The Persian Gulf War, the yellow ribbon appeared again and this time, supporters combined this symbol with and on hand painted signs.

The symbolic use of the ribbon has been extended to social causes of all types: There are patriotic red, white and blue ribbons to support US nationalistic endeavors such as war and peace keeping operatives; there are red ribbons that symbolize both the campaign of Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) and AIDS awareness, prevention and activism; there is a blue ribbon for prostate cancer, and there is the pink ribbon which is the internationally represented symbol for breast cancer awareness and activism. In the next section, I will explore the origins of the Breast Cancer Pink Ribbon.

The Breast Cancer Pink Ribbon is Born

In 1992, Alexandra Penney, the then editor of *Self* magazine, was designing the magazine's Second Annual Breast Cancer Awareness Month Issue. The first year's issue had been inspired and edited by Evelyn Lauder, senior corporate Vice President of Estée Lauder and breast cancer survivor. Penney decided to create a ribbon for breast cancer and have Estée Lauder distribute it in New York City department stores. Evelyn Lauder decided to target an even larger demographic and agreed to put it on cosmetic counters across the United States ("Estée Lauder" <http://www.elcompanies.com> 2004). A week later, syndicated columnist Liz Smith wrote a story about a grass roots movement begun by a 68-year old woman named Charlotte Haley (Fernández, 2004, p.2). To increase breast cancer awareness and to promote increased funding for breast cancer research, Haley had been making peach colored ribbons in her dining room and attaching a card to them which read: "The National Cancer Institute annual budget is 1.8 billion, only 5 percent goes for cancer prevention. Help us wake up our legislators and America by wearing this ribbon" (Fernández, 2004, p.2). She distributed the cards at the local supermarket and wrote to prominent women such as former first ladies to ask for their support. *Self* contacted Ms. Haley and suggested a partnership

promising her national attention, but Ms. Haley was not interested in a commercial venue for her cause. In a September follow-up article, syndicated columnist Liz Smith reported Haley as saying that *Self* had asked her to relinquish the concept of the ribbon (Fernández, 2004, p.3). *Self* decided to keep the ribbon, but were advised by lawyers to choose a color other than peach for the breast cancer ribbon. Thus, they chose a shade of pastel pink. In the fall of 1992, Estée Lauder makeup counters handed out 1.5 million pink ribbons accompanied by laminated cards describing how to perform a proper breast exam and collected over 200,000 pink ribbon petitions urging the federal government to increase research funding for this disease (Fernández, 2004, p.3)

The following year, Carol Cone, a Boston-based advertising executive landed the Avon account and proposed a social advertising campaign for breast cancer (Fernández 2004, p.4). She and Avon developed a unique pink enamel and gold cast pin with a gold rose in the middle, and a pink lapel pin for men. In just two years these pins raised ten million dollars for breast cancer. In 1994, these cosmetic and jewelry companies expanded their products lines that depicted the pink ribbon and the mass marketing campaign linking material goods to the breast cancer cause took root. Consequently, the pink ribbon was on its way to becoming an international symbol for breast cancer awareness and prevention!

The Signification of the Pink Ribbon

Saussure (1966) explains the process of signification as being composed of two parts: *a signifier* and *its signified*. A *signifier* is a concrete representation of a concept that may adopt symbolic significance. In turn, the *signified* is the message that is depicted by the signifier. The pink breast cancer ribbon is a symbol that both arbitrarily and conventionally serves as a signifier for breast cancer. It is an arbitrary symbol in that another symbol of another color could easily have been chosen to represent breast cancer instead. However, the pink ribbon's conventional identification as a signifier played a key role in its being chosen as the symbol for breast cancer. Here, I argue that the pink breast cancer ribbon is not a single signifier at all, but rather, it is composed of multiple signifiers including the ribbon, the color pink, its shape and line, and its texture. First, I explore these individual signifiers' contributions to the pink breast cancer ribbon as a complex signifier. Next, I discuss the relationship between the pink ribbon as a complex signifier and its signified: the breast cancer cause.

Color is a visual representation with denotative reference. Cognitively, it is used to represent culture-specific symbolic values (Danesi, 1994, p.74). For example, pink is widely recognized as the color code for femininity in western societies: Beginning at birth, pink is for girls, while blue is for boys. Emotionally, pink is used to convey certain feelings. According to Margaret Welch, Director of the Color Association of the United States, "...pink is the quintessential female color. The profile on pink is playful, life-affirming. We have studies as to its calming effect, its lessening of stress). [Pastel pink] is a shade known to be health-giving; that's why we have expressions like 'in the pink'" (Fernández, 2004, p.2). The choice of pink for the breast cancer ribbon was not an accident, but rather an attempt to identify breast cancer as primarily a 'women's disease' (Fernández 2004, p.2). 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 well being 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.

The shape and line of a signifier produce feelings in the interpreter (Danesi, 1994, p.73). The shape and line of the breast cancer ribbon may be described as soft, flowing, overlapping and looped. As a result, the interpreter may experience a sensation of youthfulness, femininity, beauty, freedom, connection and community. Texture as a signifier produces the sensation of touch (Danesi, 1994, p.75). While the texture of the pink breast cancer ribbon may vary, depending on the composition of the material used to recreate it, the ribbon is often depicted as smooth, soft and delicate. In conjunction, these signifiers contribute to the pink breast cancer ribbon as a complex visual image.

Merging Products and Product Symbols: The Ribbon and The Color Pink

How do visual images function in advertising? According to Brown (1966), visual images "...make ideas visible by giving them color and substance and sensible qualities" (p.86). In doing so, they also convey nuances of feeling to the idea being communicated and enhance the emotion associated with the idea (Brown, 1966, p.91).

Furthermore, when there is a substantial message beyond that of "buy-this-product", visual imagery introduces an element of concreteness to emotional or abstract concepts (Brown, 1966, p.93). Now that we have introduced the basic functions of visual imagery in advertising, let us explore the official relationship between companies and their products, the endorsement of the breast cancer cause, and the visual imagery these companies use to create the signified.

Many advertisements connected to the breast cancer campaign include a predominance of the color pink. Pink is an attention grabber and a visual signifier that represents a connection between a company / product and the breast cancer campaign. Advertisers have the option of how much pink to use and where to use it: Is it a background color? Is the product itself pink? Do advertisers want to establish a direct link between color, their company/product and the breast cancer cause? Or, is a natural representation more in line with the company/product image and its target audience? Companies that prefer an indirect association between their product and breast cancer research and awareness often use pink as the background color for their print ad. For example, the WNBA (Women's National Basketball Association) and ABC Sports use a shade of bright pink as the background color for their ad depicting a famous WNBA player who serves as a spokes person for the WNBA Breast Cancer Program and her mother who experienced a breast cancer scare. Likewise, Procter and Gamble uses a salmon pink as the background color in their coupon circulars. These circulars are included with many Sunday edition newspapers across cities in the United States.

In addition to using the color pink and the symbol of the pink ribbon in their advertisements, some companies choose to create in their minds of consumers an even more closely related association between their product and the campaign against breast cancer. They visually combine the ribbon symbol with their product to create a strong message to the audience: Product 'X' and the campaign against breast cancer are linked! When advertisers choose to directly link the pink ribbon symbol to their product(s), there may use two degrees linkage. First, they may choose to represent the pink breast cancer ribbon and their product(s) as separate entities, yet connect them spatially. For example, A BMW ad shows a BMW in the loop of a pink breast cancer ribbon. The human eye is simultaneously drawn to both

images and processes them in the same visual space. Thus, a connection between BMW and Breast Cancer Awareness and Prevention is established in the mind of the consumer. Second, the advertisers may choose to maintain the product's basic entity, but exploit its natural, flexible composition and distort it into a ribbon. Two examples of this visual technique are evident in the print advertisements for Keebler Wheatables (snack crackers) and New Balance (athletic shoes): In the Wheatables advertisement, the product's icon (a sheath of wheat) maintains its natural wheat color, but is bent into the shape of the breast cancer ribbon symbol. In the New Balance advertisement, a shoelace from one of the athletic shoes pictured is pink and is looped in the same way as the breast cancer ribbon symbol.

Successful Social Advertising: The Breast Cancer Campaign

By permitting repetitive reading, print advertising affords potentially deeper understanding of ideational messages than would be possible in a 30-60 second broadcast (Fine, 1981, p.110). According to Hupfer and Gardner (1971, p.10), "Once a product has been related in the consumer's mind to an issue, something important to him (or her), the probability of this person's retaining knowledge of the product is increased". Economists provide cogent arguments pointing to social pressure as the principle force motivating consumers to adopt the idea of philanthropy. In a strong statement to that effect, Bruce Bolnick maintains that at the root of philanthropic behavior lies a social interdependence among people and that charitable contributions are (often) made only to ward off the accusation by others of the donor's selfishness (Phelps, 1975, p.198). Therefore, the opportunity to give visibly to a charity should be designed in such a way as to honor the donor's need for approval, belongingness, status, self-esteem, and tax shelter. The Breast Cancer Campaign maximizes these attributes! The San Francisco-based group *Business for Social Responsibility* found that customers overwhelmingly prefer products whose proceeds help to support issues like breast cancer research (Presley, 2004, p.2). In addition, a 1999 survey by Boston-based Cone, Inc. found that when price and quality of goods are equal, customers would select brands linked to 'a good cause' (Presley, 2004, p.2). Consumers are very attracted by the simple message communicated by the pink ribbon and a catchy slogan: They are able to support the fight against a deadly disease without thinking about all of the unanswered questions concerning the origins of breast cancer (Presley, 2004, p.8).

Although the products supporting the breast cancer cause vary widely, the message their companies hope to communicate is the same: Use or consume Product 'X' and make a change. One commonality in all of the breast cancer print advertisements reviewed in this investigation is the way it is packaged positively. Social consumers want to feel as if their dollars are making a difference in the fight to obliterate breast cancer. According to Susan Sontag (1978), people often suffer more from the conceptualization of a disease than from the disease itself. This is especially true in lieu of recent medical advancements that have resulted in people living longer and even surviving diseases like cancer that were once labeled 'terminal illnesses'.

The basic purpose of advertising is to associate desire with a given commodity or service and to establish positive consumer feelings for a given brand. Together, advertisers and consumers apply a social grammar (a shared set of propositions) in structuring and interpreting a particular advertisement. It is the advertisers' job to match what a product has to offer with what consumers want. Since the involvement of Estée Lauder in the breast cancer cause, hundreds of companies have discovered the success of social advertising. Between

1993 and 2002, Avon has contributed \$55,000,000 to breast cancer research and prevention. The majority of American women wear make-up and many consider its use a daily necessity. By selling many products for less than \$4.00, donating 25-50% to the cause, and giving consumers what they want and need, Avon strives to involve the general public in contributing to this cause: "Our goal is that everyone, no matter how rich or poor can be a crusader and feel that he or she can make a contribution" (Pollack, 2002, p.3). The Eureka Company believes this type of social advertising extends consumer involvement to the community level. When responding to how their vacuum cleaners and the contributions resulting from their sale are tied to women as a group, Kathryn Keudke, PR Director, explains, "It is certainly something that touches the lives of our consumers-we've got a lot of ladies who clean house" (Pollack, 2002, p.4). The Eureka Company donates \$1.00 for every \$200.00 purchase. Groups are more powerful than individuals, and women are largely attracted to establishing relationships. By making connections with other women, women establish a community and enjoy the power that this community embodies. Yoplait donates \$.10 for every yogurt lid sent in by customers to the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation. Spokesperson Greer Bautz says, "What we've heard from consumers is that they really do like being a part of a promotion" (Pollack 2002, p.4). According to Mary Tull, Director of Caring & Sharing breast cancer support program at Beaumont Hospital in Royal Oak, Michigan (Pollack 2002, p.5), "It is good advertising, a very hot women's issue. It is also a very sympathetic thing, so you can build affection or loyalty by (supporting) philanthropic causes, whether it is breast cancer or leukemia."

It is interesting to note that unlike other social causes such as AIDS, breast cancer has not been associated with a particular group of individuals who share a common lifestyle or practices: It is a disease that does not discriminate. Therefore, breast cancer has avoided the negative social stigma that is sometimes associated with other diseases. Individuals suffering from breast cancer are regarded as innocent victims who did nothing to precipitate the onset of this disease.

Breast cancer research and prevention foundations secure the majority of non-government sponsored funding from U.S. consumers who purchase products from companies that contribute to this cause. This comes as no surprise, for the United States is the epitome of capitalism and consumerism. Other nations seem to favor more traditional approaches to advertising philanthropic causes, or at the very least, social advertising is not employed to the degree that it is in the United States. However, in light of globalization and increased international trade and communication facilitated by NAFTA, this characterization may be changing.

In 2002 in Halifax, Canada, the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce (CIBC) ("Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation-National Web Site." <http://www.cbcbf.org>) became the title sponsor for the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation's Run for the Cure. Race participants dyed their hair pink and wore pink t-shirts emblazoned with corporate logos. Many other corporations (e.g., Air Canada, Saputa, and the Canadian Ladies Golf Association, among others) joined (CIBC) in sponsoring this event. Many international companies, who had sponsored breast cancer research fundraising in the past within the United States, extended their support to this venue in Canada (e.g., Ford, New Balance, Hush Puppies, among others).

In Mexico, Fundación Cima ("Fundación Cima" <http://www.fundacioncima.org> 2004) sells breast cancer books and original art to finance their breast cancer foundation. An interesting difference between this type of fundraising and social activism via the sale of

consumer goods is the audience to which an endeavor of this nature appeals. The least expensive item for purchase from Fundación Cima sells for \$400.00 Mexican Pesos, roughly the equivalent to \$35.00 U.S. Dollars. Furthermore, books and art do not have as wide a social appeal as do crackers and tennis shoes, for they are not 'consumed' and their use and enjoyment assume a certain level of education and knowledge on the part of the buyer. Most of the Mexican population does not have the economic means to purchase such 'luxury goods'. Thus, this type of philanthropy strikingly parallels fund-raising dinners and galas that only the wealthy can afford to attend. Notwithstanding, Fundación Cima has a number of corporate sponsors that may choose to use cause advertising in their individual company/product campaigns. They include: Cie, Avon, Banamex, Fundación Telmex, Novartis and Gotland Vodka. As in the United States, Avon in Mexico has created specific products whose proceeds benefit the Avon Breast Cancer Crusade. Another U.S. product that has extended its cause marketing for breast cancer campaign is Dove. From 2002 to the present, Dove has donated 2% of its sales earned in Mexico during the months of October and November, to Fundación Cima. Clearly, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) will enable U.S. companies to more easily infiltrate the Mexican economy, and with these products will also come a variety of capitalistic advertising practices. Will developing nations, such as Mexico, recognize the funding that can potentially be generated through cause advertising within consumer-based societies? If so, will Mexican consumers buy into this marketing technique with the same enthusiasm as have their U.S. and Canadian neighbors? In the near future, it will be interesting to see if the successful nature of the pink ribbon campaign in the U.S. takes hold in other nations as well.

Conclusion

In the present paper, I have traced the contemporary origin of the ribbon as a social advocacy marker in the United States to folk legends and peace movements. Next, I have established the origin of the pink breast cancer ribbon and have deconstructed it to reveal the many individual signifiers that contribute to its whole as a complex signifier for breast cancer awareness and prevention (its signified). In addition, I have exemplified how the pink breast cancer ribbon has been visually incorporated into print advertisements for retail products and have explored several successful advertising and marketing techniques which exemplify the idea of cause advertising. I argue that the consumer behaviors characteristic of a capitalistic society in which members enjoy purchasing material goods of their choice and knowing that a portion of these proceeds will benefit the breast cancer cause, make for an ideal target market. Next, I have provided specific examples of the monetary contributions to breast cancer research donated by several companies and products through cause marketing in the United States and have shown that this cause advertising technique is beginning to appear in national economies other than that of the United States. Finally, I suggest further research that closely monitors cause-advertising, marketing practices, and consumer behaviors, as they relate to the breast cancer cause, in countries participating in *NAFTA*. Specifically, it will be interesting to see if the capitalistic and consumer-based pink ribbon campaign for breast cancer can extend its economic success beyond U.S. borders without culturally redefining itself.

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