

English 102-010H

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The Awareness Crisis: Breast Cancer and Sexualization

Classical standards of femininity are unattainable ideals for any woman to achieve. As the famous American model Cindy Crawford once said, “Even I don't wake up looking like Cindy Crawford” (Hicks). However, nowhere in modern media is the discrepancy between real women and the women “in the pictures” as obvious as in the veritable capitalist playground of Breast Cancer Awareness. Our media-driven culture holds the female breast to be the absolute highlight of a woman's body, in some cases, even placing the objectification of the breast above the woman herself, such as in advertisements where the woman's head is cropped out of the photograph (Szabo). It makes sense, then, that a disease which causes the loss of breasts might be easily marketed using targeted strategies designed to titillate and arouse, just like many current capitalistic ad campaigns do. This marketing strategy is designed, not to spread breast cancer awareness, but to spread capital gains for companies like Wal-mart, Target and even Pornhub, who distribute products with a pink ribbon, marketed with pictures of perfectly healthy female breasts (Szabo). However, real breast cancer patients and survivors are often missing one or more breasts, due to mastectomies which save their lives (Holmes). When real women who suffer and struggle with the disease take a backseat to the overly-sexual “awareness” campaigns, a discussion must be raised about who these advertisements *really* benefit.

Breast cancer awareness campaigns have been around for quite a while. The Susan G. Komen foundation, arguably one of the most profitable breast cancer foundations in the world,

was founded in 1982 by Nancy Brinkler, who is the current CEO (Szabo). The Komen foundation reports raising over \$400 million per year, and Brinkler receives a yearly salary of \$684,000, according to their public tax reports. According to public record, the charity spends a remarkably small amount on research and grants- around 15% or \$63 million and almost nothing on preventative care (Szabo). Obviously, “Breast Cancer Fundraising” is an incredibly lucrative business, and an incredibly well marketed one. Brand awareness for the “Pink Ribbon” and “Susan G. Komen for the Cure” are entirely unopposed trademarks- and breast cancer receives an enormously significant amount of media and commercial coverage compared to other prevalent cancers and similar diseases (Holmes). The question is, why? Why does breast cancer strike such a huge chord with people? How has it become such a colossally successful brand? The answer lies in sexualized targeted marketing.

It’s no secret that the female breast is immensely over-sexualized. Recent campaigns like “free the nipple” have attempted to correct the discrepancy between the sexualization of the female breast vs. the male breast- but have been vastly unsuccessful (Hicks). Female breasts, more than any other body part, are utilized in capitalist marketing strategies targeting both the male gaze and the female ideal. The male gaze involves the purposeful objectification of a woman in a pictographically set up piece of media, often completely ignoring the face of the woman in lieu of her partially exposed breasts or other titillating body parts. The female ideal, on the other hand, creates a “perfect” female body for the female consumers to “strive for”. This body is often photo shopped to the point of being completely physically unrealistic or unhealthy (Holmes).

Breast cancer awareness, like lingerie, is marketed almost entirely with pictures of nearly naked, thin, healthy women- and more specifically, their breasts. In many advertisements, the

face of the woman is completely missing- and she is wearing a lacy pink bra, of course to symbolize her “awareness” (Holmes). Campaign titles are often unsubtle risqué euphemisms for female breasts, and a half-hearted plea to save them. “Save the Ta-Ta’s!” these \$30 tee-shirts cry, and “I Heart Boobies” wristbands can be bought for only \$15 apiece. Even a popular pornography site, Pornhub.com, created its own “Save the Boobs” campaign, promising one cent of donated funds for every thirty videos viewed online- and marketing this campaign with popular pornography stars in pink bras (Szabo). It’s no surprise that these campaigns raise enormous amounts of money- and that much of it goes directly back to the companies that created them, with very little actually going to research or prevention (Szabo).

Of course, even that small amount towards breast cancer research is positive, right? It’s all in good fun- but what of the women? When a woman is diagnosed with breast cancer, survival is first and foremost on her mind, but according to breast cancer marketing, her breasts should be, instead. These ad campaigns have a two-fold end result. The first one is to raise money (for whom? We won’t ask.), and the second result is to re-enforce toxic ideas about breasts, femininity and cancer- including that the breasts might be worth more than the woman wearing them.

Breast cancer “awareness” very rarely shows women who have actually had breast cancer. It even more rarely demonstrates women who have had mastectomies, a procedure which removes the breast or breasts infected with cancer and leaves the woman with large scars, missing one or both breasts (Holmes). These entirely “Ta-Ta-less” women are the true face of bravery and survival in breast cancer, but their stories are often ignored or pushed aside in favor of perky, golden tan cleavage. Furnishing “awareness” of a disease which primarily affects women with a completely over-the-top idea of the heterosexual male’s sex drive is not only

offensive, but damaging. Many women who actually have breast cancer must face humiliation, shame and extreme self-esteem issues due to the loss of their breasts (Hicks). As it is eloquently stated by Jessica Luther,

Focusing on breasts and breasts alone obscures the reality and the faces of the people who are at the center of the fight against breast cancer. It reminds the survivors who either don't have their breasts or have scars across the breasts they do have that they are now not as wholly feminine as they once were (and they never will be). They may have beaten the cancer but they lost their breasts, the things everyone seems to actually care about.

When discussing breast cancer awareness, it is imperative to take a long, hard look- not only at how this campaign can help people, but how it can hurt them, too. Understanding the big picture and accepting that women come first in the talk about breast cancer, not the breasts, is more important than having a pink ribbon water bottle. Public support should spread, not only to other cancers that cannot be marketed so sexually, but also to the consideration of what real women face when they must fight breast cancer. Campaigns like “the Scar Project” and “the Grace Project” show the reality of women without breasts and how this loss has affected them (Holmes). Recapturing their femininity and self-acceptance is very important for breast cancer survivors, but exposing fraudulent and capitalistic “charities” is *essential*. The money going towards breast cancer shouldn't come from harmful and overly sexual campaigns, and should go to truly supportive charities such as the American Cancer Society or the Breast Cancer Foundation, as opposed to Susan G. Komen for the Cure (Holmes). In the end, the most central thing to realize is that breasts are not women and that no shame or fear should come from

throwing away breasts that bring danger to the life they belong to. Don't save the boobies, save the woman- and stop sexualizing her cancer.

Works Cited

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