

Red flags on pinkwashed drinks: contradictions and dangers in marketing alcohol to prevent cancer

Sarah Mart¹ & Norman Giesbrecht²

Director of Research, Alcohol Justice, San Rafael, CA, USA¹ and Senior Scientist Emeritus, Social and Epidemiological Research Department, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, Toronto, Ontario, M5S 2S1, Canada²

ABSTRACT

Aims To document alcohol products and promotions that use the pink ribbon symbol and related marketing materials that associate alcohol brands with breast cancer charities, awareness and survivors. **Methods** We conducted a basic Boolean public internet search for alcohol products with pink ribbon/breast cancer awareness marketing campaigns. **Results** There is strong and growing evidence of alcohol as a contributing cause of several types of cancer, including breast cancer. There is no U-shaped curve for cancer, and threshold of elevated relative risk is as low as one drink a day for certain cancers. We found 17 examples of alcohol product campaigns with websites, press releases and social media posts, along with news articles and blog posts from industry and non-profit organizations regarding alcohol products associated with breast cancer causes and charities. Various cancer charities have entered into alliances with sectors of the alcohol industry that raise funds for breast cancer research, treatment or prevention by promoting the purchase of certain alcoholic beverages. **Conclusions** Some alcohol corporations use pink ribbons and other breast cancer-related images, messages and user-generated media to market a product that contributes to cancer disease and death. Therefore, cancer charities should adopt policies to separate them from alliances with the alcohol industry.

Keywords Alcohol corporations, breast cancer, cancer charities, cause marketing, corporate social responsibility, pinkwashing, vested interests.

Correspondence to: Sarah Mart, Director of Research, Alcohol Justice, 24 Belvedere Street, San Rafael, CA 94901, USA. E-mail: sarahm@alcoholjustice.org
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INTRODUCTION

Cancer is a leading and costly non-communicable disease, with 14.1 million new cases diagnosed and 8.2 million deaths estimated world-wide in 2012 [1]. The global cost of cancer is likely to reach an estimated \$458 billion by 2030 [2]. For women globally, the breast is the most common cancer site diagnosed (25.2% of total), and breast cancer the most common cause of cancer death [3,4].

In the United States, an estimated 231 840 new breast cancer cases were projected in 2015, with an incidence rate of 124.8 per 100 000 women. An estimated 40 290 were projected to die from breast cancer in 2015, a projected death rate of 21.9 per 100 000 [5]. Direct care costs specifically for breast cancer are estimated at \$18.5 billion in the United States in 2015 [6]. In Canada it is estimated that 25 000 new cases of breast cancer were projected for 2015, with an incidence rate of 100 per 100 000 women, and a projected death rate of 5000, or 18 per 100 000 women [7].

Alcohol use is a leading risk factor for global disease burden [8], and 8% of the global breast cancer disease burden is attributable to alcohol [9]. Extensive international research has explored the relationship between alcohol consumption and cancer, leading the International Agency of Research on Cancer to classify beverage alcohol as a Group 1: Carcinogenic to Humans carcinogen for multiple types of cancer since 1988, most recently in 2010. Breast cancer was included on this list in 2007 [10]. More than 100 studies have shown a causal relationship between alcohol consumption and female breast cancer [1], and relative risks elevated at as low as one or two drinks a day [11]. A recent study found that the majority (56–66%) of alcohol-attributable female cancer deaths in the United States were from breast cancer, and that 15% of breast cancer deaths among women in the United States were attributable to alcohol consumption [12].

With its iconic pink ribbon, breast cancer awareness is a well-known example of cause marketing activities that differentiate and add value to brands by integrating

philanthropic values with profits [13]. Pink ribbon campaigns feature women of various ages, races/ethnicities, family role and professional status to reinforce the idea that all women are at risk of breast cancer. Females in pink ribbon campaigns are portrayed as responsible and empowered family members, warriors and survivors. The campaigns demonstrate good will towards women at risk of breast cancer; they are associated with hope, faith, optimism and a life-style of fitness and health [14].

Corporations have utilized cause marketing to connect products with breast cancer for decades. After pharmaceutical company Zeneca launched Breast Cancer Awareness Month (BCAM) in 1985, the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Research Foundation, *Self Magazine*, Estee Lauder and Avon all sought to promote and brand a ribbon for breast cancer awareness. Estee Lauder distributed millions of pink ribbons in the early 1990s, followed by other corporations putting pink ribbons on various products including clothes, personal care products, appliances, foods and beverages [15].

In 2002, the non-profit Breast Cancer Action (BCA) launched its Think Before You Pink campaign to call attention to companies or organizations that pinkwash, a term that describes companies marketing pink ribbon products while at the same time producing and/or selling products that are associated with breast cancer [16]. Over the years, BCA has included corporations that make yogurt, cosmetics cars and fast food in the campaign [17]. BCA also constructed a list of questions for consumers to analyze advertising messages and donations for pinkwashed products.

Questioning the details of donations made by pinkwashed products also provides a focus on the breast cancer organizations receiving the funding. In a pilot study of cancer charity websites from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom and the United States, cancer charity websites varied substantially in how they discussed alcohol and its contributions to cancer [18]. The following were noted: ease of access to information on alcohol on the web site; advice on low-risk alcohol consumption and how to control drinking; and policies to reduce alcohol-related harm in society. In several cases the information was easy to find, accurate, with clear guidelines on low-risk drinking levels and sound advice on alcohol for the patient, clinician and alcohol policy advocate. However, it was rare to find explicit and clear guidelines or policies on how charities should interact with the alcohol industries.

Although several books and articles critiquing the pinkwashing concept and practice have been published in recent years, to our knowledge this is the first analysis of marketing and promotion for alcohol products linking those products with the breast cancer cause and related charities. With this study, we sought to document pinkwashing associated with alcohol brands.

METHODS

We conducted basic Boolean public internet searches during August and September 2014 using the following key words: alcohol, beer, wine, spirits; pink ribbon; and breast cancer. Once we identified specific alcohol product brand names, we repeated the key word searches using each brand name; pink ribbon; and breast cancer. We reviewed various types of promotional materials about pink alcohol products, including official product websites, press releases and posts to social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest, along with news stories and blog posts from industry and non-profit organizations. We analyzed the materials using criteria based on the BCA campaign:

- Names of the breast cancer charities that will receive funding;
- Total amount donated to the designated organization;
- Breast cancer charity activities funded with the donation;
- Caps or limits set for amount of donation to the charity, along with timelines for donations; and
- Whether the product exposes the user to carcinogens linked to breast cancer.

FINDINGS

Pinkwashed products and promotions

We found 17 examples of alcohol products marketed with pink breast cancer ribbons and related content, including flavored malt beverages, beer, wine and spirits products; see Table 1.

We found pink ribbon alcohol products and campaigns developed for all types of alcohol: flavored malt beverages (Mike's Hard Pink Lemonade); beer (PYNK Ale, Althea and Saison de Rose); wine (RELAX Pink, Happy Bitch, ONEHOPE, Global Journey and Cleavage Creek); and spirits (Support Her and Chambord vodkas). Global alcohol producers also marketed specific wines from their existing portfolios with pink ribbon promotions during Breast Cancer Awareness Month: Chateau St Jean and Beringer (Treasury Wine Estates), Barefoot (Gallo), Sutter Home and M n ge   Trois (Trincher), and Korbel (Brown-Forman). Support Her vodka and Cleavage Creek wines, both initially released in the mid-2000s, were no longer available, yet online promotional content associating it with pink ribbons, breast cancer and related charities remained.

Nearly half the pink ribbon alcohol campaign materials we reviewed named a specific breast cancer charity to receive funding. Examples of cancer charities included the Breast Cancer Research Foundation, Save the TaTas Foundation, Fashion Targets Breast Cancer/Council of Fashion Designers of America and Breast Cancer Patient Assistance Fund. The Pennsylvania Breast Cancer Coalition was listed as the charity in a promotion for several brands, including

Table 1 Pinkwashed alcohol products, promotions, donations and recipients.

<i>Product (owner)</i>	<i>Donation promise</i>	<i>Total donation</i>	<i>Cancer charity recipient</i>
Althea beer [19–21] (Weyerbacher Brewing Co.)	\$1 per bottle sold	\$12 336	The Breast Cancer Assistance Fund, Lehigh Valley Health Network
Barefoot (Gallo), Beringer (Treasury Wine Estates), Korbel (Brown-Forman), M�n�ge a Trois (Trincher), Sutter Home (Trincher) [22]	\$1 for every case of listed pink wine sold	Up to \$10 000 \$8964 in 2013 [23]	Pennsylvania Breast Cancer Coalition
Chambord [24–26] (Brown-Forman)	\$5 for every electronic invite for a Cocktails and Cupcakes party sent	Up to \$10 000	Fashion Targets Breast Cancer/ Council of Fashion Designers of America
Chateau St Jean [27] (Treasury Wine Estates)	Amount associated with sales of Chateau St Jean during October	Up to \$100 000	Breast cancer charities
Cleavage Creek wine [28,29]	10% of the winery's proceeds	More than \$90 000 from 2007 to 2011	Integrative Oncology Center for Breast Cancer Research, Bastyr University
Global Journey wine [30,31] (Mt Vernon Winery)	12.5% of the proceeds from the purchase of each bottle of Global Journey wine	Not specified	Finding a cure for breast cancer
Happy Bitch wine [32,33]	\$1 for every bottle of pink chardonnay purchased during October	Not specified	Breast cancer research
Mike's Hard Lemonade Limited Edition Pink [34] (Mark Anthony Group)	Not specified	\$250 000 in 2013 \$1 million since 2009	The Breast Cancer Research Foundation
ONEHOPE California Chardonnay, October Collection [35,36]	50% of profits from each bottle of ONEHOPE Chardonnay	Not specified	Nonprofits that support the fight against breast cancer; The Gateway for Cancer Research
PYNK Ale [37–39] (Yards Brewing Co.)	\$1 for each case of PYNK sold	\$5000 in 2013	Tyanna Foundation; Breast cancer research
RELAX Pink wine [40] (Schmitt Sohne Inc.)	\$1 for every #RELAX4TaTas tweet, photo, or post	\$25 000 in 2012 [41]	Save the TaTas Foundation
Saison de Rose beer [42] (Free Will Brewing Co.)	More than half the cost of the kegs purchased by bars	Not specified	Rena Rowan Breast Center, Penn Medicine
Support Her vodka [43] (Cottage Grove/Side Pocket Distillery)	\$0.50 per 50-ml bottle \$5.00 per 750-ml bottle \$10.00 per 1-litre bottle [44]	Not specified	Research and treatment
Sutter Home wine [45,46] (Trincher)	\$1 for every seal/capsule or receipt from any Sutter Home wine	Not to exceed \$100 000 \$800 000 donated since 2001	Finding a cure; Research, treatment, education; City of Hope

Barefoot (Gallo), Beringer (Treasury Wine Estates), Korbel (Brown-Forman), Sutter Home and M n ge   Trois (Trincher).

Fewer than half the pink ribbon alcohol campaigns indicated a total dollar amount that was, or would be, donated to a designated cancer charity. Seven campaigns

listed specific donation amounts, with the total donation amount ranging from \$5000 to the Tyanna Foundation in 2013 to \$250 000 to the Breast Cancer Research Foundation in 2013. Several pink ribbon products listed a total donation amount over a span of years, e.g. \$800 000 donated since 2001, or more than \$90 000 donated between 2007 and 2011. Five products did not mention total donation amounts.

Most of the pink ribbon alcohol campaigns did not list specific breast cancer-related activities to be funded with the donation. When activities were listed, they were not affiliated with a specific charity name. Four campaigns listed general activities, such as finding a cure for breast cancer (Sutter Home/Trincherero and Global Journey/Mt Vernon) and breast cancer research (Happy Bitch wine).

Few campaigns listed designated caps or limits for a total donation made. Four campaigns listed caps or limits ranging from \$10 000 (Chambord/Brown-Forman) to \$100 000 (Sutter Home/Trincherero and Chateau St Jean/Treasury Wine Estates). Few campaigns listed specific timelines or time-periods for the donations. The campaigns that provided a specific time-frame for their promotions used October (breast cancer awareness month), e.g. Chateau St Jean (Treasury Wine Estates) and Happy Bitch wine.

Details about the promotions often took the form of a certain amount of donation promised per item purchased or user activity completed. Examples included \$5 per electronic invitation sent for a branded Pink Your Drink party (Chambord/Brown-Forman); \$1 for every #RELAX4TaTas tweet, photo or post (RELAX Pink/Schmitt Sohne); \$1 for every specific pink seal/capsule/receipt (Sutter Home/Trincherero wine); and \$1 per bottle sold (Happy Bitch, Althea/Weyerbacher Brewing and PYNK Ale/Yards Brewing). Other promotions were based on a percentage of an amount of pink alcohol product sold, ranging from half the profits from each bottle (ONEHOPE); 12.5% of proceeds from the purchase of each bottle (Global Journey/Mt Vernon); or 10% of the winery's proceeds (Cleavage Creek).

Several common features of the promotional content emerged as we examined the pink ribbon alcohol campaigns. Advertisements, web pages, social media and press releases often contained the following: product connections to breast cancer survivors who were family, employees or friends of the alcohol corporations; brand engagement with celebrity breast cancer survivors; alcohol sponsorship of breast cancer fundraising events; use of social media for user engagement; and sexually oriented content.

Some alcohol corporations used the stories of family, employees and friends of the company who were diagnosed with and/or died from breast cancer, and dedicated the product/promotion to them. Mike's Hard Lemonade

(Mark Anthony Group) associated the creation of its Limited Edition Hard Pink Lemonade with the death of one of its employees from breast cancer [47]. Sutter Home (Trincherero) associated its Capsules for Hope campaign with a family member/company owner diagnosed with breast cancer [46].

Other corporations associated their pink ribbon alcohol products with famous celebrities who were diagnosed with breast cancer. Chateau St Jean wine (Treasury Wine Estates) partnered with Sheryl Crow, a top female performing artist, musician and breast cancer survivor. Treasury and Crow cross-promoted the wine brand with Crow's new cookbook containing different Chateau St Jean wine pairings for each recipe. Chambord vodka (Brown-Forman) partnered with Betsey Johnson, celebrity fashion designer and breast cancer survivor, for its Pink Your Drink campaign. Johnson made appearances in Chambord promotional materials, held promotional parties at Betsey Johnson boutiques and appeared as part of girls' weekend parties offered as grand prizes [48].

The Chambord Cocktails and Cupcakes parties at Betsey Johnson boutiques were one example of fundraising social events for breast cancer charities that were sponsored by alcohol corporations. Another example was Mike's Hard Lemonade, a sponsor of the annual Breast Cancer Research Fund's Hot Pink Party in New York City, providing Mike's Limited Edition Hard Pink Lemonade for attendees to drink, displaying signs of the Mike's logo and being listed in press coverage as a major sponsor [49–52]. Smaller brewers, such as Yards Brewing Company, producer of PYNK Ale, also hosted fundraising events [53].

All the pink ribbon alcohol campaigns used social media to various extents, and one company conducted its entire campaign on social media. The RELAX Pink wine (Schmitt Sohne) campaign promised \$1 for every user-generated #RELAX4TaTas tweet, photo or post on Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest or Facebook. The beneficiary was Save the TaTas, a non-profit organization that has also listed Seagram's Escapes (North American Breweries) and Budweiser (Anheuser-Busch InBev) as donors [54].

Sexually provocative phrases and images were found on some product websites and social media pages, in official product content and user-uploaded photos. For instance, Mike's Hard Pink Lemonade marketing was revamped in 2013; in addition to the standard pink breast cancer ribbon were images of two owls, similar to the Hooters restaurant logo [55], with the messages 'This one's for the GIRLS' and 'Help save a PAIR of...!' [56]. A 'SCREW CANCER' tag line for the RELAX Pink wine social media campaign accompanied an image of a large-busted woman from the chin down, wearing a pink camisole with #relax4tatas printed across the chest. Examples of user engagement included user-uploaded photos in stores with the product and

official promotional signs and users wearing #relax4tatas camisoles or t-shirts [57–59].

DISCUSSION

Problems, contradictions and dangers

None of the marketing and promotional materials for pink ribbon alcohol products that we examined answered every pinkwashing question regarding donation recipients and funded activities; total donation amounts, caps/limits; and time-frame or award period. Most of the products and campaigns provided limited and/or general information that answered one or two of the questions. If included, a great deal of donation and cancer charity information was vague or incomplete. Many campaigns did not list names of breast cancer charity donation recipients, while others did not list total amounts of the donations that would be or were made, and some did neither. As this study focused on marketing and promotion, we did not investigate whether or not the donations listed by companies were actually made to the cancer charities.

Of those campaigns that named a total donation made, most of the amounts listed were less than \$25 000, and relatively small when compared to the costs of funding research, prevention and/or treatment for breast cancer. For instance, the National Cancer Institute, principal agency for cancer research in the United States, funded \$559.2 million in breast cancer research in FY2013 [60]. Meanwhile, a one-time donation of \$50 000 would probably not cover the life-time patient costs of direct care (including hospitalization, surgery, chemotherapy and/or radiation) for many women with breast cancer during the course of their treatments [61].

The final critical question for pink ribbon products and campaigns remains: does the product expose the user to carcinogens related to breast cancer? For alcohol products, the answer is yes. Alcohol is a contributing cause of breast cancer, even at low-to-moderate rates of consumption. Alcohol intake is both a negative influence on the course of the disease and a modifiable risk factor for developing cancer [62].

Breast cancer is not the only potentially fatal disease, chronic illness or health problem women and girls face from alcohol consumption. Differences in physical structure and body chemistry make women more vulnerable to the long-term effects of alcohol than men, including effects such as liver disease, memory loss, heart damage and mouth, throat, esophagus, liver and colon cancer [63], yet pink ribbon alcohol campaigns effectively target the female demographic of all ages.

Our brief examination of pinkwashed alcohol products found that some cancer charities have entered into philanthropic relationships and receive funding from pinkwashed alcohol campaigns. In our view, this type of sponsorship

relationship poses several risks. Ironically, it contributes to risk in the name of prevention. By default or design, the association increases the risk of cancer in a population by enhancing marketing opportunities via links to charities' networks, volunteers and adherents, thus extending the potential to increase sales of a carcinogen. The relationship extends the marketing reach with links to charitable causes and access to young women, many of whom may already drink at risky levels. Campaigns promoting alcohol funding of cancer charities could also potentially devalue legitimate evidence-based prevention messages about alcohol consumption and risk of cancer, for instance, by linking volume purchased (and probably consumed) with the amount of donation to the charity.

Another risk posed by cancer charities accepting alcohol company donations is the undermining of fundraising and network-building efforts by charities that seek to take a more precautionary and trustworthy route by not entering into corporate relationships with alcohol producers. The Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation is one promising example of a cancer charity with a clear policy on funding relationships with alcohol corporations. They have developed a corporate partnership policy indicating that they will not engage in a cause-related or social marketing partnership with an alcohol company, nor engage in a sponsorship partnership with an alcohol company [64].

As our study was a limited, descriptive examination, more research is necessary. Future research could expand the documentation of pinkwashed alcohol promotion to include alcohol sponsorship of fundraising activities for breast cancer charities (e.g. breast fest beer festivals, galas, raffles or silent auctions). Alcohol sponsorship for other types of cancer and other diseases or social problems associated with alcohol could be documented. Finally, given the inherent risk in allowing the alcohol industry to conduct pinkwashing campaigns, an examination of the financial costs and benefits seems warranted. Compared to other products and types of marketing campaigns, researchers could investigate the total amount spent by the alcohol industry on pinkwashing campaigns, and the net profit from the campaigns, as well as a cost–benefit analysis of alcohol-related harm from breast cancer, compared to the profit from pinkwashed alcohol campaigns.

CONCLUSIONS

Some alcohol products are developed for and/or marketed with pink ribbon and breast cancer awareness promotional campaigns. Some breast cancer charities enter into promotional philanthropic relationships with alcohol corporations, despite the fact that alcohol consumption is an avoidable risk factor for breast cancer. While any type of cause marketing campaign associating products with breast cancer awareness and charities should include

details about the total amount donated, the time-frame and the charities and activities funded, in the case of pinkwashed alcohol campaigns, providing that information would not eliminate the product's association with, and the potential damage from, breast cancer. In order to reduce the risk of alcohol-related cancer and promote effective prevention strategies, alcohol producers, distributors and retailers should refrain from marketing products with pink ribbons and affiliations with breast cancer charities.

Restricting and limiting alcohol marketing is included in recommendations of cost-effective, evidence-based policy to reduce alcohol consumption and related harm from the World Health Organization and other government and non-governmental organizations [65–67]. Pinkwashed alcohol products and campaigns should be included in any alcohol marketing restrictions. Breast cancer charities should reconsider whether they enter into new marketing arrangements or continue existing arrangements with alcohol companies. Cancer charities can separate from alcohol sponsorship and create clear policies on how to interact with alcohol corporations and other industries whose goals run contrary to cancer prevention. Leaders of cancer charities can join with public health and policy advocates to make the separation of alcohol marketing and cancer clear.

Declaration of interests

None.

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