

# An Analysis of the Social Construction of Breast Cancer Awareness in Media and Cause-Related Marketing

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## Abstract

Today, women's experience following breast cancer is being a survivor. This experience is a demedicalized one, there are no medical connotations attached, women are not patients, they are survivors. Breast cancer activism discourse presents this survivor experience and seeks to destigmatize the disease through public awareness. The demedicalized nature of the disease and its messaging of awareness has provided an opportunity for companies to capitalize on this discourse through cause-related marketing. This paper uses Arthur Frank's concept of the communicative body to explain the origins of the social construction of breast cancer as a demedicalized experience and to analyze new media messaging of breast cancer activism within the past decade. The analysis conducted establishes two dominant themes in breast cancer activism in new media. Firstly, the use of survivors employing Frank's communicative body to build awareness, which can be traced back to the origins of the movement in the 1970s. Secondly, the corporate capitalization of the movement, namely the pink ribbon through cause-related marketing. This paper argues the demedicalized experience of having breast cancer still maintains its core values as a survivor-focused movement about women communicating their illness as survivors through their communicative bodies. However, the demedicalized nature has in turn allowed companies to capitalize on its messaging for their own financial gain. This paper finds that the 'pinkwashing' produced by cause-related marketing for breast cancer damages activist messaging through its monetization, distorting the social construction of awareness, and dividing survivors in their views of how awareness should be communicated. This ultimately creates two sides of raising awareness: one created through survivors using Frank's communicative body, the other established by companies using cause-related marketing.

## Keywords

Frank's communicative body, social construction, breast cancer, cause-related marketing

## Introduction

Breast cancer activism has a deep-rooted history of advocating for public awareness and destigmatization of the disease. The movement still enjoys individual support from survivors (Elliott, 2007, p. 523) showing there is still an individually driven element of the movement. This current individual support stems from the 1970s when women's patients and consumer's rights movements sought to eliminate stigma by moving breast cancer out of the private sphere and into the public (Sulik, 2010, p. 28). This shift means that contemporary women's experience with breast cancer is rarely that of a patient, and instead one of a survivor (King, 2004, p. 473). Part of this 'survivor experience' is the emphasis on garnering awareness of the disease. Awareness can be constructed in two ways: through a survivor's communicative body, such as Wanda Sykes (Figure 1), and through for-profit advertising, such as Mike's Hard Lemonade (Figure 2). This is because the pink ribbon continues to be used in advertising, corporate activism included (King, 2004, p. 488). The demedicalized social construction of breast cancer has enabled opportunistic companies to tie their brand to activism through cause-related marketing. This creates 'pinkwashing,' which in the context of breast cancer refers to a company claiming to care for the activist cause but, in reality, goes against it. The historical roots of breast cancer activism symbolized by the pink ribbon socially constructs breast cancer awareness today as a demedicalized experience enabling cause-related marketing to capitalize on the activism, which distorts breast cancer discourse.

### Figure 1

*Screenshot of a Tweet from Breast Cancer Research Foundation of Alabama*



Note. From Breast Cancer Research Foundation of Alabama [@BCRFAlabama], August 20, 2021. <https://twitter.com/BCRFAlabama/status/1432383204812460033>

**Figure 2**

*Screenshot of an advertisement for Mike's Hard Lemonade*



*Note.* From Cerullo, 2014.

<https://www.eater.com/2014/7/3/6195271/this-july-fight-breast-cancer-with-mikes-hard-lemonade>

### **The Origins of Breast Cancer Activism in the 1970s as Owning the Disease**

The prevalence of North American breast cancer activism today originated in the 1970s. Formerly, breast cancer was a private experience because of the confidential doctor-patient relationship, and the stigmatization of the disease conferred ‘deviant’ status to women and was treated as a death sentence (Sulik, 2010, p. 27). The private nature of the disease at the time and its associated stigma resulted in social isolation for most patients, as they were unaware of others with the same diagnosis (Sulik, 2010, p. 28). This lack of information regarding other women’s diagnoses with breast cancer meant the experience with the disease was individual, kept within the confines of the private sphere and doctor-patient relationship.

The individualized experience women in the 1970s faced with a breast cancer diagnosis effectively made the disease unknown. According to Broyard (1995: 50 as cited in Gwyn, 2001), the ill person needs to personify and ‘own’ their illness, not let it be anonymous like medicine depicts (p. 15). To clarify, the anonymity of an illness refers only to a patient’s experience. Anonymity came from being categorized under the umbrella of ‘the patient.’ This meant the 1970s movements “encouraged patient empowerment, the development of lay medical knowledge, and commitment to sharing information with other women” (Sulik, 2010, p. 28). This empowerment, commitment to sharing knowledge, and refusal to let the disease be anonymous was a response to the harmful medical discourse that isolated women. Patient empowerment and the widespread sharing of information was how women of the 1970s began to ‘own’ their illness, refusing to suffer in isolation any longer.

### **Arthur Frank’s Communicative Body as Central to the Roots of Breast Cancer Activism**

Arthur Frank’s concept of the communicative body explains how women ‘owning’ their breast cancer went from an individual to a collective movement. Frank defines the communicative body as one that manifests solidarity with others’ suffering and the body itself communes with others, inviting them to recognize themselves in it (Gwyn, 2001, p. 15). The invitational nature of the communicative body is central to breast cancer activism because of the shared experience it creates between patients. This commitment of those who ‘own’ their illness

and build awareness removed the individual anonymity of breast cancer, destigmatizing the disease by communing with others. Frank's communicative body centers the patient experience through the invitation of another body. This explains why the women's and consumer rights movements of the 1970s created a vibrant and successful social movement with diagnosed women at the center of it (Sulik, 2010, p. 28). This is because having diagnosed women at the center of the movement invited other diagnosed women to recognize themselves within the movement.

### **The Contemporary Social Construction of Breast Cancer**

The movements in the 1970s to destigmatize breast cancer and empower women was a success as the movement is currently "an enriching and affirming experience during which women with breast cancer are rarely 'patients' and mostly 'survivors-'" (King, 2010, p. 286). The term 'demedicalized' describes the shift from the experience and terminology of a patient to a survivor. Instead of experiencing a medicalized experience as a patient when the disease was stigmatized, survivors experience an affirming demedicalized experience of survivorship. Being a survivor does not hold the medical and social connotations that being a patient does, which makes being a survivor a demedicalized experience. To reflect this demedicalized survivorship, a universal symbol was needed to symbolize the movement. The use of pink can be traced to the Susan G. Koman Foundation handing out pink visors in the 1990 Race for the Cure, while the pink ribbon was handed out by the same foundation in the 1991 race (Elliott, 2007, p. 523). Since then, pink has been embraced as the colour of breast cancer, symbolizing the struggle to overcome by survivors (Elliott, 2007, p. 523). While each survivor's story is different, the iconic pink ribbon and the colour pink act as unifying symbols of triumph over the disease that survivors can rally behind. The pink ribbon is a further development of Frank's communicative body, inviting breast cancer survivors to recognize themselves under the collective experience it offers. The breast cancer movement then and now is what codifies the pink ribbon's significance, making the symbol inseparable from the movement.

The discourse of survivorship and the symbol of the pink ribbon dominate the social construction of breast cancer today. Conrad and Barker (2010) describe the conceptual framework of social construction as emphasizing "the cultural and historical aspects of phenomena widely thought to be exclusively natural" (p. 567). The history of breast cancer

activism in creating a shared survivor experience and the iconic pink ribbon act as the conduits of the cultural and historical aspects of social constructionism of the movement today. Currently, survivors still believe building awareness is important, in Taylor and Knibb's study, they found awareness was the most prominent theme for survivors and

“[i]t is important to survivors—in their personal lives, for their friends and family, and for other women in general” (Taylor and Knibb, 2013, p. 197).

Taylor and Knibb's findings regarding the importance of awareness of the disease trace back to the 1970s movement to destigmatize the illness through women sharing information with each other. This prevalence of social awareness of the disease through the communicative bodies of breast cancer survivors connects modern activism to its roots. The use of figurative language is significant in the social construction of an illness, as “cultural analysts pointed out illnesses may also have metaphorical connotations” (Conrad and Barker, 2010, p. 69). Breast cancer as an illness draws on survivorship as a metaphor for the patient's experience. Medical language does not provide metaphorical connotations, which is why the language of being a survivor and not a patient is used. This difference is significant as the use of metaphors in the social construction of breast cancer, namely the metaphorical connotations of being a survivor, contributed to the disease being demedicalized.

### **The Social Construction of Breast Cancer Activism on Social Media as Supported by Frank's Communicative Body**

An example of the social construction of breast cancer today being based on Frank's communicative body as a discourse is the Breast Cancer Research Foundation of Alabama's (BCRFA) August 2021 Twitter post featuring Wanda Sykes (Figure 1). The post not detailing any information about Wanda Sykes' diagnosis is crucial to the social construction of breast cancer, demonstrating the demedicalized discourse. Additionally, breast cancer survivors possess embodied knowledge of breast cancer, which they apply to their lived experiences (Taylor and Knibb, 2013, pp. 189-190). The embodied knowledge breast cancer survivors possess and the demedicalized social construction of the disease means that the discourse produced by the BCRFA's Twitter post does not need to be medical in nature. The user itself (the BCRFA) is the only reference to medicine. This adds credibility to the post as the poster is a non-profit organization, signifying their objective in posting is not driven by profit. The poster being a

non-profit is important for the encoding of the post, as in this case, the post's discourse is not distorted by its publisher through means of commodification.

Frank's communicative body as discourse is communicated through the featuring of actress Wanda Sykes (Figure 1). There is no description of Sykes' story, with her only descriptors being "actor" and "breast cancer survivor" (Figure 1). While minimal, these labels are significant in conveying Frank's communicative body, as Sykes' name, career, and face are attached to the status of "breast cancer survivor" (Figure 1). These identifying features mean her breast cancer is not anonymous and her association as a survivor is her way of 'owning' it. Her status as an actor is also significant, as breast cancer activism utilizes the power of celebrity (Sulik, 2010, p. 112). Sykes' image, and status as an actor and breast cancer survivor, establishes a communicative body which the BCRFA uses in #MondayMotivation (Figure 1). The context of the post as a motivational post further establishes the demedicalized construction of breast cancer, as the use of Sykes is for unspecified motivation.

While Sykes plays an important role in the communicative body discourse produced by the post, the use of the colour pink and the iconic pink ribbon in the bottom left (Figure 1) demonstrate the unifying nature of breast cancer symbolism. The use of the colour pink as an embraced symbol of triumph by survivors indicates Sykes' status as a breast cancer survivor. Additionally, Sykes' status as a survivor shows the importance of metaphors in the social construction of breast cancer. The discourse produced in this Twitter post is the communicative body of Wanda Sykes, which has been adopted as a metaphor for the patient experience. Since the colour pink is encoded as symbolism for breast cancer awareness, using Sykes' communicative body alongside the colour invites survivors to recognize themselves in it.

The example of the BCRFA's Twitter post demonstrates the social construction of breast cancer through a communicative body discourse. The creator of the post being a non-profit and using breast cancer survivor Wanda Sykes alongside the colour pink creates an optimal discourse for survivors. This is because the post spreads awareness and is not commodified through a product tie-in. This is important for breast cancer survivors, as Taylor and Knibb's (2013) study group identified representation as crucial to fostering awareness of breast cancer but criticized its commodification (p. 194). This post creates optimal awareness as it conveys awareness of breast cancer through the representation of Sykes as a communicative body without commercialization. The social construction of breast cancer through its history and the symbolism of the pink ribbon

is powerful; it can be harnessed by media posts such as the BCRFA's Twitter post to produce a positive discourse for survivors. The metaphorical connotations of survivorship as the patient's experience with breast cancer allow the use of the power of celebrities, such as Sykes, to further resonate with an audience.

### **Cause-Related Marketing's Distortion of Breast Cancer Activism's Social Construction**

Mass media is important to the social construction of breast cancer, contributing to its dominance in the public image (Sulik, 2010, p. 112). The BCRFA's Twitter post is an example of how media can be used for an optimal discourse on breast cancer awareness as it features a non-commercialized post of a breast cancer survivor and the symbolic colour pink. The use of pink through mass mobilization fulfills John Durham Peter's communication function of "building worlds together" (1999 p. 30, as cited in Elliott, 2007, p. 523). Mass dissemination connects breast cancer survivors, unified by the pink ribbon which dominates the public image, but also can dominate major brand portfolios (Sulik, 2010, p. 112). Once companies get involved in the dissemination of breast cancer awareness through their commodification of the cause, like Mike's Hard Lemonade (Figure 2), activism becomes monetized. While mass dissemination can be useful to uplift breast cancer awareness, it can also distort its message (Elliott, 2007, p. 524). The distortion of breast cancer activism's discursive messaging is produced by the commercialization of breast cancer activism and its pink ribbon.

This commercialization of breast cancer awareness has a specific name: cause-related marketing, which is:

"An agreement between nonprofit and for-profit organizations to promote a product that provides benefit for the cause through increasing awareness and financial contributions from sales" (Harvey and Strahilevitz, 2009, p. 26).

The use of awareness is important in the definition of cause-related marketing because it is significant to breast cancer survivors. No corporations are licensed to have exclusive use of the pink ribbon (Harvey and Strahilevitz, 2009, p. 26), which means any enterprising company can take advantage of the symbol. This distortion by mass dissemination is seen in cause-related marketing as the demedicalized experience of breast cancer survivors who value awareness is boiled down to its literal definition by companies. Survivors seek to achieve awareness through their storied experience and communicative bodies, while for-profit companies build awareness



by tying the pink ribbon to their product. The difference between the two is survivors build awareness based on their storied experience such as the example of Wanda Sykes. Companies like Mike's Hard treat awareness based on marketing and product placement. This is evident in the Mike's Hard Pink Lemonade advertisement (Figure 2) which instead of using a survivor's story or experience as the focus point, Mike's Hard uses its product.

Mike's Hard Pink Lemonade's breast cancer promotion (Figure 2) is an important media example that demonstrates the distortion of breast cancer activism's discourse by some companies. Since no corporation has exclusive rights over the pink ribbon, misuse of the ribbon can occur through the marketing of products that can increase breast cancer such as alcohol (Harvey and Strahilevitz, 2009, p. 26). As an alcoholic product, Mike's Hard Pink Lemonade falls under this umbrella. The ad features the use of the colour pink as well as the iconic pink ribbon (Figure 2) which is not a surprise as "the pink ribbon has ubiquitously become the symbol for breast cancer awareness in the US and increasingly the world" (King, 2010, p. 286). The use of this symbol by products such as Mike's Hard Pink Lemonade is problematic as it capitalizes on the importance of awareness for survivors.

The power of the pink ribbon has been taken advantage of by cause-related marketing. Its demedicalized nature and the pink ribbon enable the easy commodification of breast cancer awareness. This is because there is already an existing symbol tied to the movement and an emphasis on awareness by survivors. There is no barrier to using the pink ribbon. Anyone can use breast cancer activism and its symbol as a marketing ploy to build awareness of their product. This is problematic as it does not follow Frank's communicative body for building awareness that survivors use. While on the surface, the ad does bring awareness, the problem lies in the product tie-in, removing the communicative body aspect and monetizing the messaging.

The ad for Mike's Hard Lemonade shows the worst of cause-related marketing and how mass dissemination with the aim of monetization such as ads distorts the social construction of breast cancer. The social construction relies heavily on metaphors of the patient's experience, such as the classification of breast cancer patients as survivors who won their battle against the disease. Mike's Hard Pink Lemonade capitalizes on this metaphor through the slogan attached to the ad which is "Grab Mike's Hard Pink Lemonade & Join the Fight Against Breast Cancer" (Figure 2). The irony of grabbing an alcoholic beverage that can cause cancer to fight breast cancer demonstrates the lack of restrictions on who or what can use breast cancer activism in

media. Although ironic, this slogan also distorts the social construction of breast cancer by tying Mike's Hard lemonade to the metaphor of fighting against breast cancer. This distorts the social construction of breast cancer by monetizing the use of a metaphor experienced by survivors.

The inappropriate use of Mike's Hard Pink Lemonade being tied to the pink ribbon is a clear example of 'pinkwashing,' which the advocacy group, Breast Cancer Action defines as "marketing harmful or carcinogenic products in the name of breast cancer" (Taylor and Knibb, 2013, p. 195). Mike's Hard Pink Lemonade is physically harmful as it can increase the risk of breast cancer, but is also harmful to breast cancer activism due to the distortion of the original message. A key indicator that this company treats breast cancer activism as a marketing ploy is the creation of the pink lemonade flavour for breast cancer awareness month (Cerullo, 2014, para. 1). This suggests they are treating breast cancer awareness akin to a holiday-promotion flavour, demonstrating the awareness they seek to build is aimed more towards their product, not genuine support for the cause.

While Mike's Hard Pink Lemonade is an example of pinkwashing, it is worth noting that it still brings awareness to breast cancer. The monetization of breast cancer activism by companies has divided survivors on the extent they support cause-related marketing. Participants in Taylor and Knibb's (2013) study group expressed sentiments that there was empty commercialization in breast cancer marketing but also expressed hopeful sentiments that there were aspects that did create awareness and spread information (p. 196). Elliott (2006) discusses how the most fervent denouncers of pink codification are survivors, partly because of the commodification of the colour and its meaning by corporations (p. 526). These two cases show the acceptance of cause-related marketing is not universal to all survivors. The damaging aspect comes from how cause-related marketing forces survivors to create a level of comfort with the commercialization of activism. This divides survivors, as they have different beliefs regarding the monetization of the movement. While the pink ribbon unifies survivors' various lived experiences, cause-related marketing divides them.

### **Conclusion**

The history of breast cancer activism and the pink ribbon is responsible for the social construction of breast cancer today. This message has been distorted by corporations' use of cause-related marketing to merge breast cancer awareness with their product. Breast cancer

activism's history explains why survivors owning their illness and utilizing Frank's communicative body is central to the movement. In the current media landscape, the awareness of breast cancer generated by survivors is still persistent. This is clear in the chosen example of Wanda Sykes, where her communicative body as a survivor and actor is used to spread awareness. The use of Frank's communicative body in breast cancer awareness using survivors is what ties contemporary breast cancer activism to its historical roots.

Unfortunately, the emphasis on awareness of breast cancer's social construction has opened the doors to companies that aim to boil this movement down to its literal definition through cause-related marketing. This is evident in Mike's Hard Pink Lemonade's ad, which not only ties the pink ribbon to their alcoholic product but also creates an alcoholic beverage tied to the movement. This is a case of 'pinkwashing, which distorts the aim of breast cancer activism's messaging. This is supported by the fact that this product can cause cancer and forces survivors to take a divided stance on the commercialization of breast cancer activism. The key difference between the case of BCRFA's Twitter post and Mike's Hard Pink Lemonade ad is the use of Frank's communicative body. The BCRFA's post upholds the social construction of breast cancer activism by sharing Sykes' story alongside the pink ribbon, communicating her story to other survivors. Mike's Hard Pink Lemonade ad has no storied experience tied to it, instead, the ad is tying its product to the pink ribbon.

It is important to recognize there is no universal agreement by survivors on the extent to which cause-related marketing should be accepted, which is why the practice is so damaging. Breast cancer activism seeks to destigmatize the disease and bring survivors together, unifying their stories under the pink ribbon. Cause-related marketing is profit-driven and since anyone can use the pink ribbon, controversial products can be advertised alongside the pink ribbon under the guise of spreading awareness. This divides breast cancer survivors in their willingness to accept cause-related marketing as a form of activism and distorts the social construction of breast cancer awareness through its monetization and creating two forms of awareness. One form is survivor-based, using Frank's communicative body to build awareness. The other is cause-related marketing, which distorts the social construction of the former by boiling down breast cancer awareness to its literal definition, damaging the storied meaning and history of the movement.

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