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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Sober thoughts

Breast cancer awareness pink ribbons are being used to sell alcoholic drinks — a known carcinogen. It's giving a very mixed message, says Gillian Bowditch

Gillian Bowditch Published: 11 October 2015

The pink ribbon associated with breast cancer awareness is the most glamorous of fundraising icons and one of the most lucrative. Each October it adorns everything from supermodels — cue Kate Moss provocatively posing in a Stella McCartney bra, her blushes spared only by a strategically placed breast cancer awareness ribbon — to cosmetics, clothes and candy. But doctors are warning that the use of the pink ribbon should in some cases raise a red flag.

Big Alcohol — the name collectively given to the multibillion-pound drinks industry — is muscling in on the act. Dr Peter Rice, chair of Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems, is calling on cancer charities to become more aware of inappropriate “pinkwashing” by alcohol producers and of the link between alcohol and cancer. About 6% of new cancer cases are attributed to alcohol, Rice says, and when it comes to dietary links with cancer, alcohol is by far the strongest.

Pinkwashing — the inapt appropriation of the breast cancer awareness ribbons to sell products to women — is becoming increasingly prevalent in the US. Research by the group Alcohol Justice uncovered 17 brands of beer, wines and spirits involved in pinkwashing, including Her Vodka and wine produced by Sutter Home.

It's not hard to see why such promotions appeal to the alcohol producers. According to Gayle Sulik, author of *Pink Ribbon Blues: How Breast Cancer Culture Undermines Women's Health*, the pink ribbon has become a symbol and proxy of goodwill towards women. By using the icon, companies identify themselves as caring about women and being socially aware.

“Screw cancer” runs the advert for Schmitt Söhne's Relax Pink wine. “Relax wines help save the tatas”. “Pink Your Drink” runs the promotion for Chambord vodka on social media, which promises a donation of \$1 (65p) for every like or share of the post. The winery Chateau St Jean recruited the singer-songwriter and cancer survivor Sheryl Crow to promote its Notes of Hope campaign, which promises a donation to charity on bottles decorated with the pink ribbon.

But are alcohol campaigners oversensitive to links with breast cancer charities? After all, the pink ribbon is one of the most successful global fundraising initiatives. And with calls in the last week to increase the age at which alcohol can be legally drunk in Scotland to 21, and to close off-licences in the most deprived areas because higher levels of outlets per capita selling alcohol there could be a contributing factor to inequalities in rates of alcohol disease, are we in danger of becoming a nation of killjoys?

ACCORDING to Robin Room, professor of alcohol policy research at the University of Melbourne and part of the World Health Organisation's policy group on alcohol, Scotland is leading the world on tackling alcohol harm.

Nicola Sturgeon was given a standing ovation by health workers from more than 60 nations when she addressed a conference for the Global Alcohol Policy Alliance in Edinburgh last week. There was a consensus that Sturgeon's determination to introduce minimum unit pricing for alcohol and take on the Scotch Whisky Association, which is opposing the initiative through the European courts, could set a precedent for other countries.

“Scotland is in a leading position in terms of doing things,” says Room. “You did come from a fairly dire position, however. There has been some continuity at the political level. I was here when your first minister was talking and I've never heard a leader give a talk that was so informed and committed. This is about nation-building.”

Health campaigners speaking at the conference insist the dangers inherent in increasingly sophisticated and segmented marketing techniques are all too real. Far from being killjoys, those working to counteract the health risks associated with alcohol are life-savers, they say.

“When breast cancer charities partner with pinkwashed alcohol brands, it extends the potential for increased sales of a carcinogen,” says Sarah Mart of Alcohol Justice. “It devalues prevention messages about drinking and cancer risk by linking the volume purchased and consumed with the amount donated to charity.”

“The links between alcohol and some cancers have been known for quite some time,” says Rice. “The incidence of mouth cancer, for example, is much higher in people who both drink and smoke. What is relatively new in the field of cancer is the link between breast cancer and alcohol consumption. It took quite big studies to establish that the more a woman drinks — from a base of zero — the greater her risk of breast cancer. That has been emerging evidence but it is something the cancer charities need to take into account.”

So ingrained is alcohol in our culture, according to Rice, that some cancer charities are in danger of sending out mixed messages about alcohol.

October is not only breast cancer awareness month, it is also the month when Macmillan Cancer Support runs the fundraising initiative Sober for October. "Soberheroes" are sponsored by friends and family to have 31 alcohol-free days, but the charity offers a "Golden Ticket" which allows participants to buy themselves a night off to "enjoy a cheeky tipples or two" if they donate extra cash of £15 or more.

"Macmillan runs a Sober for October fundraiser, which is basically people sponsoring others to stay sober," says Rice. "You might think they would mention that it also has a beneficial effect on your cancer risk. In fact the whole thing is presented as an obstacle race — completing a challenge and getting your friends to sponsor you.

"One thing that needs to be challenged is the concept of the Golden Ticket. You get time out from your 30 days of sobriety, the subliminal message being it is so hard for people to go without a drink. The whole message is one that needs to be rethought. To be fair to Macmillan, this is quite recent evidence but there is a very mixed message. There needs to be more public awareness of the link between alcohol and cancer and that needs to feed through into the cancer charities' thinking."

Heather Pearl, national events marketing manager at Macmillan, points out that Sober for October is a fundraising campaign aimed at challenging social drinkers to change their habits for a month and raise vital funds.

"The focus of the initiative is not on encouraging people to drink less for health reasons," Pearl says. "Macmillan encourages people to always drink responsibly and stick to the recommended guidelines. A Golden Ticket allows a participant to drink alcohol on a specified day in October for a special occasion. While those taking part in Go Sober might feel healthier by refraining from alcohol, the aim of the fundraiser is to raise money for people affected by cancer — and buying a Golden Ticket is one way of making a donation."

According to Professor David Jernigan, director of the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore, Big Alcohol's marketing tactics are becoming more insidious, particularly when it comes to the use of social media and the impact on young people.

Jernigan says not only are youth exposed to alcohol promotions, they are exposed more effectively than adults time and again. But studies on the impact of alcohol on young people that are not brand specific tend to underplay the effect of marketing on young people. More than half of youth exposure to alcohol advertising comes from less than 10% of brands.

"From 2010 to 2013, the top 75 brands favoured by underage drinkers sponsored 945 events," Jernigan says. "The most popular youth brands are much more likely to sponsor events, and the events are most likely to be in sports, music and the arts.

"Alcohol marketing is a major risk factor for underage drinking. Young people who have a T-shirt, a baseball cap or some such promotional item with an alcohol brand's logo on it are 50% more likely to start drinking than young people who don't. This is an example of brand ambassadorship and brand ambassadorship is everything that social media is about."

Brands favoured by young people, such as Smirnoff, Budweiser and Jack Daniels, have become "extremely active" on social media in the past five years, Jernigan says, and, in addition to increasing their number of posts, the brands have become much better at generating likes and shares. There have been no longitudinal or controlled studies into alcohol marketing and social media, and so causality cannot be established, but Jernigan says there is strong evidence from seven papers that alcohol promotion on digital media influences behaviour and increases consumption. Advertising on social media can also undermine regulation that restricts traditional advertising, Jernigan says.

It's a position denied by the drinks industry. Diageo, which owns Smirnoff, Smirnoff Ice and Ciroc, points to a 36% decline in children drinking alcohol since 2003. Admissions of under-18s to hospital due to alcohol consumption are down 41% in the past six years, it adds.

"Diageo markets its brands in a responsible way to adults, adhering to strict codes of marketing practices, including a rigorous digital marketing code," said a spokesman.

"The balance of evidence does not show that alcohol marketing increases consumption either by adults or by young people; nor is there evidence to show that, where marketing bans do exist, there is less harmful drinking than where they do not. Marketing does not drive consumption or misuse; rather, it provides consumers with relevant information to help them select between brands in the marketplace."

Diageo points to research which shows that 90% of Facebook's UK users are over 18. Jernigan points to research revealing more than a third of 13- to 18-year-olds admit to lying about their age online.

"MARKETING isn't the problem," says Gerard Hastings, professor of social marketing at Stirling University and the Open University. "Marketing is a mutually beneficial exchange. This is about power.

"Conventional advertising has the power to capture emotions and the power to normalise drinking. Digital advertising has the power to become my mate, the power to get me marketing and the power to create my very realities. There are legitimate questions to be asked about what our leaders are doing to defend our young people from such overweening power."

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