

Defend Your Research

HBR puts some surprising findings to the test



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The Color Pink Is Bad for Fighting Breast Cancer

The finding: Seeing the color pink makes women less likely to think they'll get breast cancer and less likely to donate to cancer research.

The research: Stefano Puntoni ran a battery of experiments in which he primed women with gender cues by, for example, showing them ads dominated by the color pink or asking them to write essays on gender. He then asked them to rate how likely they thought they were to contract breast cancer or to give money to efforts to eradicate ovarian cancer. The women primed with gender cues were far less likely than the control group to think they'd get cancer—and far less likely to donate.

The challenge: Is the strong pink branding of breast cancer charities counterproductive? Should fundraisers switch to gender-neutral colors? **Professor Puntoni, defend your research.**

Puntoni: Our original prediction was boring. My research partners—Steven Sweldens of Insead and Nader Tavassoli of London Business School—and I thought pink and other gender cues would make campaigns against women's diseases, such as breast and ovarian cancer, more effective. But we found the opposite. When women wrote an essay about gender, just 42% of them said they would donate to ovarian cancer research. When they wrote a gender-neutral essay, 77% did. And those who saw a pink ad about breast cancer were significantly less likely to say that they'd contract the disease than those who saw an ad with neutral colors. We thought, "This can't be right." So we kept running studies. We looked at the effects

of gender cues on women's recall. We put breast cancer banner ads on a website we showed the subjects but never mentioned them. When the site was geared to women, 33% of women recalled the ads. When it was gender-neutral, 65% remembered. It's been three years, and we have duplicated the same basic finding 10 times. It keeps happening.

HBR: Why doesn't pink inspire women to fight the fight?

In psychology, there's a lot of literature on defensive responses. How do we deal with threatening ideas, with things that are existentially difficult to comprehend? What happens is, these set off very strong denial mechanisms. By adding all this pink, by asking women to think about

gender, you're triggering that. You're raising the idea that this is a female thing. It's pink; it's for you. You could die. The cues themselves aren't threatening—it's just a color! But it connects who you are to the threats.

These findings fly in the face of the marketing principle that you should build a strong brand that emotionally connects with consumers.

That's right. It remains true that you want a cause to be instantly recognizable and present in people's minds. That's how you get social change. But we've shown that just because you make a brand more relevant, that doesn't mean you make it more effective. In fact, I'm confident that the opposite is happening.

To be clear: It's not the color itself but the fact that it is a gender cue that triggers the response?

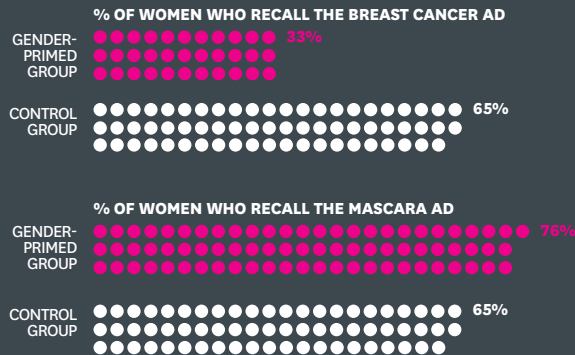
Yes. Female colors, symbols, and voices. Visuals of things associated with women. Text that clearly targets a woman. The popular phrase "Think pink." We would argue that the use of all those things is counterproductive to the goals of breast cancer fundraising.

So all gender cues trigger defensiveness like this?

No. First, the thing you're talking about has to be threatening. For example, in the study, when we put breast cancer banner ads on websites, we also had a control site where we put mascara ads—makeup is not going to trigger defensiveness. And indeed, subjects' recall of the control ad was nearly the same regardless of whether the site was geared to women. Second,

Targeting That Backfires

Early research findings indicate that women's ability to recall breast cancer awareness ads is dramatically lower when those ads are on websites geared specifically to women, as opposed to gender-neutral sites. However, if the ads promote something nonthreatening—such as mascara—a feminine context increases women's recall slightly.



the negative effect doesn't seem to be present with men and prostate cancer. My suspicion is that prostate cancer is not nearly as threatening for young men as breast cancer is for young women. Prostate cancer tends to afflict older men, but breast cancer is the number one killer of younger women.

Pink is so entrenched as part of the breast cancer brand. Is there any way to preserve it but overcome the negative effect?

I think so. We're starting to gather evidence that just acknowledging the fear seems to offset the defensive triggers. Also, we've seen that the negative effect on perceived risk can be eliminated by helping the audience build a buffer against the threat posed by breast cancer by, for example, boosting their self-esteem by asking them to think about times they helped others.

Why is pink a gender cue?

Nothing makes pink a feminine color except what we think. Pink as a feminine color is a relatively modern phenomenon. Before the 20th century, it was a male color. It may change again. But right now, pink is female and has this effect.

How do men react to pinkness?

In one study we asked women to look at two ads about breast cancer. They found

a pink ad harder to read than a more gender-neutral peach ad. We wondered if it was contrast or some other optical effect. But when we asked men about the same ads, they thought the pink one was slightly easier to read. We don't know too much beyond this. I will say that seeing more men wearing pink as part of breast cancer awareness may start to break down the color's effect as a gender cue. Or maybe it has an empowering effect on men, who would donate more because of it. We don't know yet.

Do you see a whole new vein of research opening around gender cues?

It's quite new, but we really weren't visionaries at all. It was just good data talking to us. We could have published a paper earlier if we weren't so skeptical of the results in the first place. Over the past 10 years, researchers have put more effort into thinking about consumer welfare. What can we do as researchers to help consumers make better decisions? How can we effect change in areas like overeating and disease prevention? This is part of that. We could go more general with the gender cue research, but breast cancer is such an important disease that I want to study this more on its own. ♥

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