In this paper, we will be exploring the concept of Rainbow Capitalism wherein a plethora of MNCs use the rainbow flag on their marketing collateral in order to strategize their business growth. We also aim to explore the thin line between 'support' and 'pink-washing' by accentuating the extent to which neoliberalism produced a market-mediated and consumer-driven visibility by alluding to different brands and marketing strategies that will help us see through blatant pandering and social progressivism.

The concept of capitalism is built on the notion of accumulating wealth and is a macroscopic economic system dependent on the tensions between demand and supply forces in the market. The fundamentals of capitalism are thus based on the dynamics of the relation between demand and supply which has the undertones of intentional and structural imbalances. Neoliberal capitalism, a phase of capitalism where restrictions on the global flow of commodities and capital, including capital in the form of finance have been substantially removed, impacts the construction of queer identity by replicating exclusionary hierarchies of power inherent in capitalism within queer communities and individuals. Due to such inequality being weaved in the fabric of capitalism, it ceases to exist sans an imbalance and inaccessibility to resources.

Another important concept is that of identity formation which is both an emergent process of self-discovery and self-identification, as well as a constructed response process to culture (Cathers, 2017). Sexual orientation, physical or emotional attraction to a particular gender or gender identity, is considered an inherent process, but the parameters by which an individual may satisfy and express this attraction are culturally defined and influenced (Burnes, 2014).

Rainbow Capitalism aka Pink Capitalism is a subgenre of a capitalist economy engulfing the LGBTQIA+ population under its belt as current or potential customers (Yeh, 2018). It essentially connotes the practice of businesses creating products specifically marketed towards the queer community, in order to capitalize off and leverage their purchasing power. While it is important to gain cognizance of the fact that this hypocrisy exists since we live in a world teeming with consumerism, we also cannot deny the fact that celebrating pride has transmogrified into a sort of marketing gimmick. People indulge in this bandwagon in order to promulgate performative allyship via purchased goods rather than activism. However, there are a myriad of companies who celebrate pride, not just by splattering rainbow colours on their products but by embracing the notions of love, equality and diversity, thereby helping and supporting the LGBTQ non-profit organisations.

For instance, in 2019, the Converse Pride Collection featured a variety of Pride symbols tinted with pride colours whose proceeds would benefit LGBT groups like the It Gets Better Project and OUT MetroWest. Even Disney’s The Rainbow Disney collection offers more than 50 products, including ringer tees, jewellery, backpacks and rainbow Mickey Mouse ears whose proceeds help GLSEN, a non-profit organisation established to provide a safe and inclusive environment for LGBTQ students.

Besides, Nike, American Eagle, Absolut and Banana Republic are a few firms championing the LGBTQIA+ community rights and giving back to the community. However, one cannot eliminate the fact that most of the LGBTQIA+ movements have become increasingly corporatized due to which pride has now changed to capitalism with a pink hue as the pride parades are often dominated by big business sponsors and floats, vote-seeking politicians and state agents such as the police, who brag about their LGBTQIA+ inclusiveness.

One such example is Adidas’ campaign of the “pride pack” to honour Pride month, also one of the major sponsors for this year’s World Cup held in Russia. The
contradiction comes into play with the realization that Russia is a country with anti-LGBTQIA+ laws that bring forth the sheer emptiness that lies at the centre of corporate gestures of “support” for the community. It is easier to show support for the LGBTQIA+ community by changing your logo or by buying a shirt rather than addressing the deeper issues we perpetuate. While it is important to understand that it is a step forward in spreading awareness, it is imperative to know where the money is going and whether capitalist corporations are taking any measures to benefit the community.

Marketing targeted towards the LGBTQIA+ community is also one of the major forms of Pink Capitalism. Several companies economically exploit the LGBTQIA+ community’s self-expression through their production of pinkwashed items. They cater to the LGBTQIA+ community by splattering the colours of the rainbow since it makes financial sense. Thus, rainbow capitalism is essentially practised to capitalize off the purchasing power (pink money) that queer people have by indulging into pinkwashing.

The term Pinkwashing is a portmanteau of “pink” and “whitewashing” which in the context of the LGBTQIA+ community, essentially delineates the promotion of the gay-friendliness of a corporate or political entity in an attempt to be perceived as progressive, modern and tolerant. One can find a plethora of examples wherein corporates and political entities have involved into pinkwashing. Evident examples can be found in local or international LGBTQIA+ magazines or other offline/online platforms, such as Têtu and Shangay - two main gay magazines respectively in France and Spain. (Yeh, 2018)

However, on the other hand companies, including H&M, donate a portion of what their customers spend on pride merchandise to LGBTQIA+ charities. The amount going to charity varies by the company and product: J. Crew donates 50 percent of the purchase price of its pride T-shirts; H&M only donates 10 percent of the sales from its “Pride Out Loud” collection. So, money going to LGBTQIA+ charities are a good thing, right? In the abstract, yes, but taken in aggregate, this consumerist donation structure creates a context of so-called slacktivism, giving brands and consumers alike a low-effort way to support social and political causes.

This brings us to the idea of looking at the rainbow flag as a symbol of freedom from occupation. Studying representation of a homophobic Palestine versus a gay-friendly Israel, it can be understood that the key words used to describe lives for gays in Palestine are “secretive”, while gay lives in Israel are linked to “safety”. The Israeli government uses pinkwashing to brand itself as tolerant and modern, while painting the rest of Middle East as backwards and violent. This same government simultaneously uses the sexuality of closeted LGBTQIA+ Palestinians to blackmail them into becoming informants. In this specific case, one can see the mobilisation of the rainbow flag for purposes other than promoting the LGBTQIA+ community. The rainbow flag as a global symbol is not only appropriated by the hegemonic power but also contributes to the decolonisation of the Palestinian queer and encompasses not only LGBTIQIA+ rights, but also the struggle against military occupation and for national independence and social justice.

Airbnb markets itself as a progressive and ethical alternative to the hotel industry, its actual impact is
much more sinister. It profits off the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians by listing properties in the occupied West Bank, which is a war crime under international law.

Understanding the flag as a floating signifier illuminates the central role that places have in the creation and conflict over meaning, so radically so as those that have been standing for hours holding the rainbow flag as an expression of community and belonging now strongly endeavour to disidentify themselves from the same flag. By blending gay/lesbian-friendly elements in marketing campaigns like a splash of rainbow colours, seeking sponsorships of LGBTQIA+ organizations and events, or involving gay/lesbian couples in the commercials, helps create a self-identifiable association with their LGBTQIA+ customers. For instance, with the approving of same-sex marriages in the USA in 2006, a myriad of brands grabbed the opportunity and started syncing their campaigns to LGBTQIA+ elements, which not only showed support for LGBTQIA+ but also reinforced the gay/lesbian-friendly image among their customers.

In major cities in the world, nightlife and city tourism has become an integral part of urban lifestyle, and thus related business is logically viewed as an alternative profit-making logic. LGBTQIA+ specific business in this realm is emerging as well: gay and lesbian bars, nightclubs, themed restaurants and even gay hotels. In order to attract LGBTQIA+ customers, they make every possible means available, to incorporate theme-related elements into their business models. (Yeh, 2018)

Thus, with the rise of the gay rights movement, pink money has gone from being a fringe or marginalized market to a thriving industry in many parts of the Western world. LGBTQIA+ couples are DINK (Double income, no kids) couples who have fewer children than other groups and higher-than-average salaries, meaning plenty of disposable cash. Hence, pink money can bring billions of dollars to any economy if the spending power of queer population is activated. For instance, earlier, India was possibly throwing away more than $26 billion a year when it marginalised the LGBTQIA+ community. Now with the decriminalising of the Section 377, Indian markets are likely to benefit from the vast spending power of the queer community. This decriminalization of homosexuality has allowed the nascent gay culture to be embraced by all and thereby laid the foundation for the country’s pink economy. This brings forth the problem with commodifying “awareness”. While it may serve to raise money for a charitable cause, there’s no guarantee that money will result in any sort of tangible outcome. It’s nominal activism divorced from real action.

After the milestone judgement of scrapping section 377, a plethora of campaigns were projected in the face of the Indian queer community. A gazillion VIBGYOR brands and advertisements with nebular links to the LGBTQIA+ community have introduced stylised merchant to fleece of the middle class in the name of pride. Moreover, every pride parade is meticulously altered to sync with the narrative that ‘Love is love’. This support and celebration of pride doesn’t actually help in materializing equality and inclusivity as it is just done to create more propaganda.

These arbitrary references to queer issues have arisen only after the decriminalization. Prior September 2018, gay narratives weren’t even mentioned and businesses were the last pressure groups to wake to the needs of these community. Now, within legal tandem this process of global exploitation has unfolded to not propel the movement but to benefit of it. Majority of these companies fail to take articulated stands but rather paint a few rainbows here and there to show support.

However, visibility and its power cannot be undermined. LGBTQIA+ movement that is based on shared experiences of resistance and independence from powerful institutions, is being sucked back into its hold. It is hard to ignore the blackened hands that paint these rainbows. The question of being a true ally also comes into place, for the good intentions of these programs are severely doubtful if this rainbow capitalism hoards the space of unheard queer voices and takes the mic from queer narratives rather that echoing the fundamentals of this movement.

References


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