

**INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LAW
MANAGEMENT & HUMANITIES**

[ISSN 2581-5369]

Volume 4 | Issue 2

2021

© 2021 *International Journal of Law Management & Humanities*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://www.ijlmh.com/>

Under the aegis of VidhiAagaz – Inking Your Brain (<https://www.vidhiaagaz.com>)

This Article is brought to you for “free” and “open access” by the International Journal of Law Management & Humanities at VidhiAagaz. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Journal of Law Management & Humanities after due review.

In case of **any suggestion or complaint**, please contact Gyan@vidhiaagaz.com.

To submit your Manuscript for Publication at **International Journal of Law Management & Humanities**, kindly email your Manuscript at submission@ijlmh.com.

The Progressive Disillusionment of Pink Capitalism

SIDDHAANT VERMA¹

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzed the concept of pink capitalism and its negative consequences. Pink Capitalism hurts social movements because corporations tend to value profits over progress. The liberation of LGBTQ+ people is essentially determined by their purchasing power which is largely concentrated with white, homosexual men. Pink capitalism has also created separate niche markets for queer people to interact with each other in a relatively safe space. This can have both positive and negative impacts which are further expounded upon in this paper. The concept of cancel culture as a product of unrestrained capitalism has also been discussed. This is something that not only hurts LGBTQ+ individuals, but non-queer members of society as well. Pink capitalism further been has been analyzed through the lens of Max Weber's theory of social stratification.

I. INTRODUCTION

Pink capitalism essentially refers to the **incorporation or the co-opting of progressive movements, usually LGBTQ+ civil rights, by the media and corporations which thereby mainstream these ideas in a capitalist economy.** Intuitively, this may seem like good progress. The fact that companies now actively seek to appease certain marginalized communities illustrates the fact that society in general has become more receptive to progressive ideas. **This paper will critically analyze the aforementioned phenomenon and how it affects the ongoing fight for LGBTQ equality in the west.**

II. ANALYSIS

It should be fairly obvious that big corporations care more about **earning profits than genuinely championing progressive causes.** They'll pander to any movement with high popular support, and those that are able to improve their bottom line. Even so, one might argue that the paradigm shift caused by such movements is still a step in the right direction. However, the fact that corporations have started targeting the LGBTQ+ community must mean that there

¹ Author is a student at Jindal Global Law School, India.

has been a corresponding **rise in the purchasing power within that community**. While that is true, these gains have been primarily concentrated in **white, upper-middle class gay men** (Carpenter 2017). This means that if we were to take an intersectional approach to this problem, pink capitalism leaves out the rest of the LGBTQ+ community, and further **exacerbates the class, gender and racial hierarchy within it**. Pink capitalism also tends **to misrepresent or even undermine social movements**. Take, for instance, the controversial 2017 Pepsi commercial starring Kendall Jenner (Victor 2017). It aired at a time of widespread protests and riots against police brutality faced primarily by African Americans. The advertisement, depicting a similar protest showed Kendall Jenner presenting a can of Pepsi to a police officer, as a metaphorical olive branch. This seemingly innocuous commercial was deemed problematic because it depicted a privileged white woman as a symbol of reconciliation between the establishment and the oppressed. It was tone-deaf, it undermined the seriousness of the issues being protested and downplayed the very real dangers protestors face, all to sell a product. This ended up hurting not only the social movement, but also the Pepsi brand. **This illustrates that movements which seek to adapt to normative capitalism aren't really effective in uplifting marginalized communities.**

Over the years, as we've gradually grown more inclusive as a society, the purchasing power of the LGBTQ+ community, or **pink money**, has skyrocketed due to an increased access to conventionally heteronormative jobs. According to some studies, gay men actually earn more than their straight counterparts, and companies are doing everything they can to capitalize on this trend (Carpenter 2017). Using this newfound purchasing power, the LGBTQ+ community has also been able to **successfully boycott business that are opposed to their interests**. Chick-fil-A, for instance, is an American fast-food chain that drew massive criticism for donating to charities that opposed same sex marriage. The sustained backlash eventually forced them to stop supporting such charities (Yaffe-Bellany 2017). The surge of pink money has also led to the **creation of niche markets that cater specifically to queer people**. These markets may include things like certain types of bars, nightclubs, clothing brands etc. The underlying assumption behind the creation of such markets is that homosexuality is a consolidated identity rather than merely a sexual orientation. In other words, being gay may reveal a lot about an individual's personality rather than just who they like to have sex with. Although positive depictions of LGBTQ+ individuals in the media advertising certainly has its benefits, these depictions only tend to portray the **heteronormative ideal of the LGBTQ+ community**; which is usually an overly sexualized, buff, white gay man. This commodifies all LGBTQ+

people under a single identity, which is obviously not representative of the queer² community as a whole and undermines the massive diversity within it. Moreover, this may dissuade young queer people from coming out of the closet if they don't conform to that heteronormative ideal. This is especially dangerous since the LGBTQ+ community, which is supposed to be inclusive, may start to resemble an elite and exclusive club. **Most portrayals of the queer community are done with the motive of making them more digestible for the heterosexual population.** The relationship between the niche queer market and the conventional capitalist markets is fairly one sided as well. Large, mainstream brands try to appease the queer population, especially around pride month. However, heterosexual people don't reciprocate the same level of interest in queer products. Most attempts at appeasement of queer people by big companies come off as meaningless virtue signals. They try to take the apparent 'morally correct' position on issues to enhance their goodwill in the market. The championing of important social causes by companies is not seen as an end, but as a means to economic benefit. Indeed, most proponents of LGBTQ+ causes would like to see total inclusion of queer people in society, one without the need for 'gay markets' and 'straight markets', but an economy that caters to the needs of everybody equally. This niche queer market initially came into existence in the latter half of the 19th century to shelter queer people from violence and discrimination (Chauncey 1994, 331). It was supposed to be a temporary fix to a problem that would be solved by changing the social order to one that accepted queer people. As things got better, one would've expect this parallel queer market to slowly dissipate. This, however, hasn't happened. The size and scope of this market has only expanded. This isn't healthy because a movement which once sought to integrate queer people into society now seems to be deepening these divisions. Businesses, of course, have a vested interest in maintaining these divisions because they clearly profit off them.

We have seen how pink capitalism has either non-positive or detrimental impacts on the LGBTQ+ community specifically. It can, however, have an adverse effect on the rest of society as well. The underlying basis on which pink capitalism **functions puts profits over progress and the accumulation of meaningless PR points over liberation.** This has resulted in a phenomenon that is commonly referred to as '**cancel culture**'. Cancel culture refers to the social ostracization of a person or an organization who is deemed to have objectionable or offensive views. Those who are ostracized are said to be 'cancelled'. Usually, this phenomenon targets big celebrities, who, due to their vast material wealth can afford to take a momentary hit to their reputation. The term generally has negative connotations, although one may argue

² The word 'queer' in this essay is used as an umbrella term to describe all non-cis, non-heterosexual persons.

that individuals like Harvey Weinstein deserved to be cancelled. In more recent times, however, even regular **working-class people have been subject to ‘cancellation’**. Often, their transgressions are minor or even non-existent. A good example of this is that of Emmanuel Cafferty, a San Diego truck driver, who was duped into making a hand gesture on camera, that is often associated with white supremacists (Mounk 2020). The video quickly became viral and scores of people on social media demanded that his employer immediately terminate him. He was, ultimately, fired by the company. **This is essentially how power dynamics work under capitalism. The corporations obviously care about their bottom line, and the high-level executives care about retaining their consolidated power at the top.** It’s much easier for them to fire low- level, expendable employees to avoid a marginal loss to their reputation, rather than take action to push for genuine reform. Systemic change in liberal democracies is hard, there are a lot of conflicting electoral interests, and lobbying enough people in power to pass meaningful legislation can be exhausting. In such a scenario, doing cheap, performative PR stunts may be more appealing, but this is not true progress. If anything, this risks alienating people who may otherwise be convinced to join a positive cause. The fight for liberation of marginalized groups has always been anti- establishment and opposed to tyrannical corporations. Therefore, it’s peculiar that the economic incentives of corporations are now so much in line with those of a lot of ‘activists’. **This would suggest that as any social movement attempts to bring about wholesale change, capitalism merely adapts to that new social order.**

Let us examine pink capitalism through the lens of social stratification. Max Weber, through his theory of social stratification, described that a person’s status in society is determined by three things- **wealth, prestige, and power**. Wealth refers to all the material economic things such as money and property, prestige refers to the respect commanded by an individual in society, and power refers to the ability of people to fulfill their objectives(Weber 1922, 531-540). Where an individual is placed in the three aforementioned categories, determines their likelihood of upward social mobility. The status of LGBTQ+ individuals has increased in all three aspects over the years. Their purchasing power has increased dramatically to the extent that they wield a considerable amount of economic influence. Various opinion polls have showed that support for LGBTQ+ causes such as same sex marriage have been on a steady rise (Pew Research 2019). LGBTQ+ individuals also have considerable representation in the government and form a sizeable voting bloc to the extent that politicians often make conscious efforts to win their support. While all of this is true, we’re still on the long and arduous road to full equality, and as mentioned previously, the **gains made by the LGBTQ+**

community have primarily been enjoyed by white homosexual men. Transgender people for instance, still tend to have lower income than their cisgender counterparts, the issues they fight for don't enjoy as much support, and they barely have any representation in the government (Brown 2017). Moreover, while employment discrimination is technically illegal in the US, stereotypes and implicit biases end up hurting LGBTQ+ applicants. Gay men, for instance are generally perceived as effeminate, weak and passive, whereas employers often tend to value characteristics such as toughness, dominance, and aggressiveness (Tilcsik 2011, 10-11).

How do we remove the obstacle of pink capitalism, to pursue genuine progress over performative virtue signaling? The wholesale abolition of capitalism and redistributive measures to help the LGBTQ+ community may sound enticing, but it is neither pragmatic nor feasible in today's political climate. Activists, and social movements, then, must pressure the governments and corporations to do meaningful reforms. An unregulated free market allows for discrimination based on immutable characteristics such as sexual orientation and gender identity in areas of employment. People must push for laws that will provide LGBTQ+ individuals with equal access to employment. The vast majority of people in high level executive positions of large corporations are straight white men. While there is nothing wrong with straight white men, it is hard for them to empathize with the needs of the LGBTQ+ community and provide a safe space for them in the workplace. There must be a greater emphasis on increasing workplace diversity, and mandating diversity training so that employees can assimilate better in their respective workplaces. Companies can donate to charities that support LGBTQ+ causes instead of employing woke branding, which will not only improve their goodwill, but they'll also end up making a positive difference.

III. CONCLUSION

In summation, pink capitalism acts as a **band-aid to a problem that requires a meaningful, long term solution.** It does not represent true progress. It creates an illusion of progress and acceptance while diverting our attention from the poor material conditions that still holds the LGBTQ+ community back. The mostly cis, white and straight executives of companies often end up caving to the wrong type of social pressure, which ends up doing more harm than good to the cause. We must push for progress in all areas that affect the social stratification of a person in society and pursue change that will have a material and meaningful effect on the lives of the LGBTQ+ community.

IV. REFERENCE

1. Carpenter, Kitt. 2017. "Gay Men Used to Earn Less than Straight Men; Now They Earn More." *Harvard Business Review*, December 4, <https://hbr.org/2017/12/gay-men-used-to-earn-less-than-straight-men-now-they-earn-more>
2. Victor, Daniel. 2017. "Pepsi Pulls Ad Accused of Trivializing Black Lives Matter". *The New York Times*. April 5, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/05/business/kendall-jenner-pepsi-ad.html>
3. Yaffe- Bellany, David. 2019. "Chick-fil-A Stops Giving to 2 Groups Criticized by L.G.B.T.Q. Advocates". *The New York Times*. November 18. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/18/business/chick-fil-a-donations-lgbtq.html>
4. Mounk, Yascha. 2020. "Stop Firing the Innocent." *The Atlantic*. June 27. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/stop-firing-innocent/613615/>
5. Weber, Max. 1922. *Economy and Society*. University of California Press.
6. Pew Research. 2019. "Attitudes on Same-Sex Marriage." May 14. <https://www.pewforum.org/fact-sheet/changing-attitudes-on-gay-marriage/>
7. Brown, Anna. 2017. "Republicans, Democrats have starkly different views on transgender issues". November 8. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/08/transgender-issues-divide-republicans-and-democrats/>
8. Tilcsik, András. "Pride and Prejudice: Employment Discrimination against Openly Gay Men in the United States." *American Journal of Sociology* 117, no. 2 (2011): 586-626. Accessed December 1, 2020. doi:10.1086/661653.
9. Chauncey, George. 1994. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940*.
