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Rainbow Capitalism: Why Pandering to Queer People Isn't *Real* Inclusivity

Every year during Pride month, dozens of corporations incorporate the rainbow flag into their branding, from their profile picture on Instagram to Pride-themed clothing lines. These corporations have even started sponsoring Pride events, plastering their logos on massive floats at Pride parades. These quote-unquote “acts of inclusivity” are examples of “Rainbow Capitalism,” which is a term used to detail the [allusion to the incorporation of LGBTQIA+ rights into corporations with profit-incentives](#). Rainbow capitalism is, at its core, harmful to the queer community as a whole, but especially to queer people of color.

When discussing the relationship between queer identities and capitalism, the terms “rainbow capitalism,” “pinkwashing,” and “pink capitalism” are often used interchangeably. Although the use of these specific terms didn't really show up in queer discourse until [around 2014](#), the LGBTQ+ community's connection with capitalism has been a topic of discussion for many years. In his 1983 essay *Capitalism and Gay Identity*, historian John D'Emilio discusses how there was no queer subculture in the U.S. until the rise of capitalism in the nineteenth century, and how capitalism gave individuals [“relative autonomy,” which was “the necessary material condition for the making of lesbianism and gayness.”](#) D'Emilio later explains that although capitalism may have established the individual autonomy necessary to establish queer identities and subcultures in the U.S., it also encourages and enforces the heterosexual nuclear family structure, which [“guarantees that capitalist society will reproduce not just children, but heterosexism and homophobia.”](#) Overall, the main argument D'Emilio makes, which is

something that still resonates heavily with the queer community today, is that [“in the most profound sense, capitalism is the problem.”](#)

The harmful nature of rainbow capitalism comes from companies’ shallow attempts at allyship, all the while lacking any [“substantive action towards LGBTQ+ justice,”](#) as well as supporting practices and legislation that ultimately harm queer people. A good example of this phenomenon is Adidas’s “Pride Pack.” Since 2015, Adidas has been releasing a collection of [Pride-themed merchandise](#) every year during Pride month. This may seem like a step in a positive direction or even representation, but Adidas’s allyship to the queer community is actually pretty shallow in its execution. Adidas was one of the [sponsors for the 2018 FIFA World Cup](#), which took place in Russia, a country with strict anti-LGBTQ laws. This contradiction between Adidas’s message of support for the queer community and their financial involvement with a country with laws that actively discriminate against that same community shows how money plays a larger role in Adidas’s decisions than human rights issues.

Although the discussion about Rainbow Capitalism has become more mainstream in recent years, there’s a crucial aspect of this issue that is often overlooked: how the commodification of queer identities is rooted in white supremacy. Rainbow Capitalism is, in its essence, a form of whitewashing, just as much as it is [pinkwashing](#).

The birth of Pride Month occurred during the [Stonewall Riots in June of 1969](#), when queer people, especially queer people of color, fought for their freedom while facing incessant brutality from the police. The fight against police brutality and Pride are intrinsically connected, no matter

how whitewashed Pride has become in recent years. So when Pride merchandise is released by companies such as Nike and Walmart, who benefit from and/or use prison labor when trans women of color and gender-nonconforming people of color are [incarcerated at disproportionate rates](#), it's clear that their support is nothing short of disingenuous.

Pride was founded by queer people of color, who put their lives on the line to fight for the liberation of the LGBTQ+ community. In order to properly honor Pride's liberation-oriented history, there would need to be some major changes to what Pride currently looks like.

One of the most crucial changes that need to happen in order to truly honor the core values of Pride is that companies need to transition away from rainbow capitalism. If corporations are going to continue to produce Pride merchandise or sponsor Pride events, they need to start making ethical choices that support queer people. That means not using prison labor, directly donating to LGBTQ+ charities and organizations such as the [Trevor Project](#) or the [National Center for Transgender Equality](#), and not manufacturing products or sponsoring events in countries with anti-LGBTQ+ legislation. Progress cannot be made unless corporations take responsibility for their pandering and hypocrisy, and actively change their actions to genuinely support the queer community.