

Pride or For Profit?

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In this essay I aim to critically conceptualise postmodern theories that facilitate the commercialisation of *Pride*. In doing so, I examine the contemporary intersection between commodification, neoliberalism and globalisation, thus exploring the detrimental manifestation of hegemonic cultural production. Furthermore, I explore to what extent do identity politics, the postmodern spectacle and the fetishisation of activism enable the commodification of the rainbow flag. Finally, I present the counter-progressive effects the collaboration of these critiques has on *Pride*, concluding that the authentic essence of the celebration becomes alienated from its true radical meaning.

Pride once presented itself as a site of rebellion, disruption and resistance for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community in 1969. The event comprised of protest marches, rejecting heteronormativity, rigid categorisations and inequality (Markwell, 2002). Due to modernisation and legislative regimes, *Pride* is understood more as a transgression of heterosexual assumption, manifesting in carnivalesque, flamboyant displays of celebration that reflect the free-flowing nature of sexuality (Giddens, 1992; Bell and Valentine, 1995; Lewis and Pile, 1996).

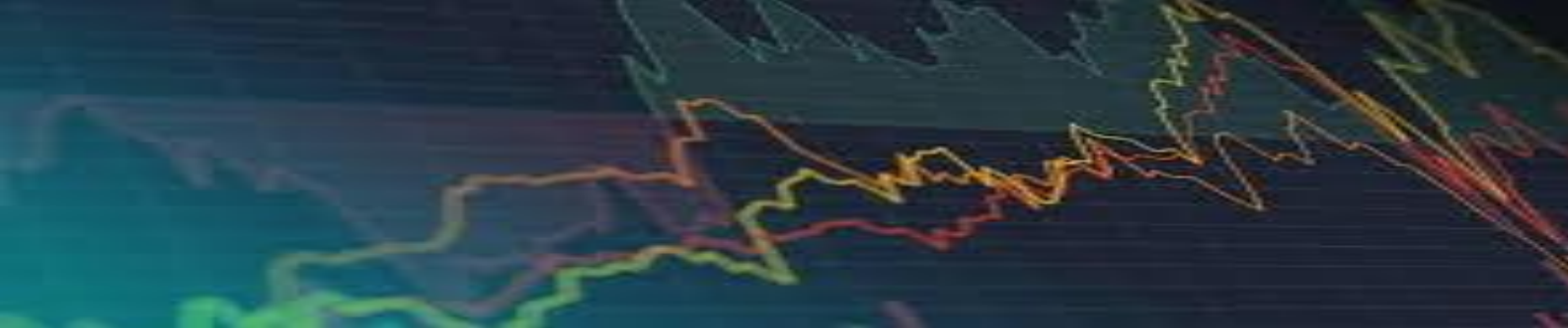
In order to evaluate the effects commercialisation has on *Pride*, highlighting the intersection between commodification, neoliberalism and globalisation within society is essential. A key indicator of the

post-modern era is the shift from career and skill in the formation of identity, to conspicuous consumption and the impacts this theory has on status and thus, social stratification (Veblen, 2005). Bauman (1992) describes this development as, 'the crucial role of the link which fastens together the life-worlds of the individual agents and the purposeful rationality of the system' (p.49).

Moreover, the development of Fordist ideologies surrounding labour, transformed perspectives encompassing production and, later, consumption. This was facilitated by firstly, the increase of wages and the accessibility of goods; secondly, the construction of new markets, propelled by globalisation, and lastly, the formation of the public as consumers through advertising and media.



This contributed to the rise of mass consumption, mass culture and mass society (Kumar, 2005; Featherstone, 1990). Adorno and Horkheimer (1971) argue that the same marketised, commodity approach applied to production manifests itself within the sphere of consumption. Through a neo-Marxists analysis, they concluded that cultural production is dictated by exchange value, thus essential differences, cultural traditions and qualities are transformed into commodities and quantities (Featherstone, 1990).



Moreover, Repo (2020) theorises this post-modern process through the example of the feminist movement. She uses concepts such as, 'political consumerism' (Stolle and Micheletti, 2013), 'commodity activism' (Weiser- Banet and Mukherjee, 2012) and 'causerism' (Goodman, 2013) to exhibit the contemporary collaboration of the neo-liberal commodification of progressive ethical attitudes with the emergence of conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 2005; Giddens et al., 1994). This development manifests itself in marketable consumer products, such as the rainbow flag, with the promise of ethical standards. However, are these corporations really that progressive or are these ethical standards false promises?

Klein (2000) argues that the liquefying of boundaries surrounding identity, politics and, therefore consumption, emerged and evolved throughout the 1980s. She argues that the absence of legal and political strategy within society categorised diverse representation of minority groups as the sole solution for progressive social change.

This isolation, combined with the argument of Marx and Engels (1970), that desires and beliefs are socially constructed to reflect the conditions in which they derive from, accelerated the financial benefit of marketers, corporations and media makers who adopted 'diversity' as central to their brand identity (Featherstone, 1990). Likewise, an additional commercial accelerator was the development of neoliberal political structures that facilitated the privatisation and deregulation of markets which enabled the expansion of global

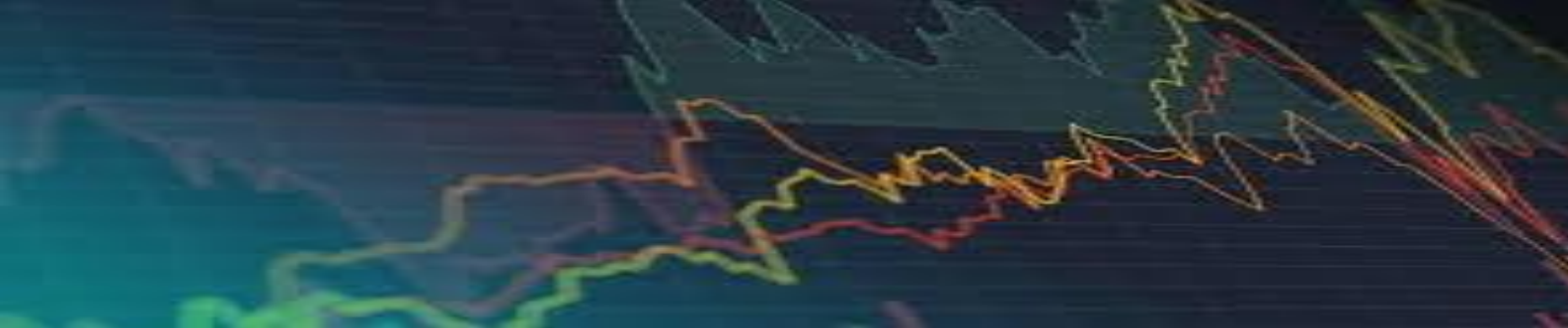


capitalism. This process in conjunction with 'diverse' brand identity became fundamental in the successful expansion of global advertising. Corporations that commercialised 'diversity' economically benefited due to the ability to globally standardise the promotion of 'radical' commodities.

This standardisation enabled companies to sell and advertise homogenous goods that contributed to cultural imperialism and thus facilitated the accumulation by dispossession whilst simultaneously appearing to agree with progressive attitudes by aligning with their brand identities (Harvey, 2005). 'By embodying corporate identities that are radically individualistic and perpetually new, the brands attempt to inoculate themselves against accusations that they are in fact selling sameness' (Klein, 2000, p. 118).

The intersection of commodification, neoliberalism and globalisation has facilitated homogenic corporate commercialisation. The collaboration of these theories with the postmodern spectacle, commodity fetishism and Marxist alienation will support the critique that activism, specifically *Pride*, has become estranged from its original meaning, becoming a standardised, alienated event.

The disunity of *Pride* from its meaning, through commodification, is accelerated by the postmodern spectacle. Debord (2012), among other theorists, examines this contemporary process of attaching personal philosophies and identities to commodities. Salter (2015) presents this through material commodities that inherently



embody global politics due to their material embeddedness in globalised webs of social, political and economic processes. Moreover, another manifestation of this process presents itself in the rainbow flag. The flag that first appeared in 1978 was used as a symbol to advocate for equal rights. The flamboyant, diverse use of colour present in the flag perpetuated the narrative that sexuality is free-flowing and inclusive of indifference (Giddens, 1992). Additionally, this materialisation of radical, inclusive attitudes provided increased visibility and funding for LGBT+ communities and charities (Barker, 2022). So, what's the catch?

This process of embodiment, that can be compared to 'semiotic democracy' (Fiske, 1989, p. 122), facilitates commodity fetishism which enables

corporations to create a 'meditated construction of reality' (Couldry and Adreas, 2017). Bauman presents this in his critique, 'But consumption, being servant of needs, had to justify itself in terms of something other than itself.' (Bauman, 2001, p.9) Commodity fetishism seduces the consumer into purchasing *Pride* merchandise as a way to demonstrate solidarity and involvement in the progressive movement.

This distortion between object and subject radically shifts the strategies and aims of political action, transforming collective movements into individualistic trajectories (Honig, 2017). Clayton (2018) states that major high street fashion retailers such as H&M and Levi's have been found to manufacture *Pride* merchandise in countries that not only punish homosexuality with life imprisonment, but have additionally banned all festivals, screenings and forums that celebrate

homosexuality. Moreover, research found that Primark contributed 20% of their profits accumulated from the sale of their *Pride* collection to the *Stonewall* charity. However, the production of their *Pride* collection derived from Myanmar; a country where homosexuality is banned.

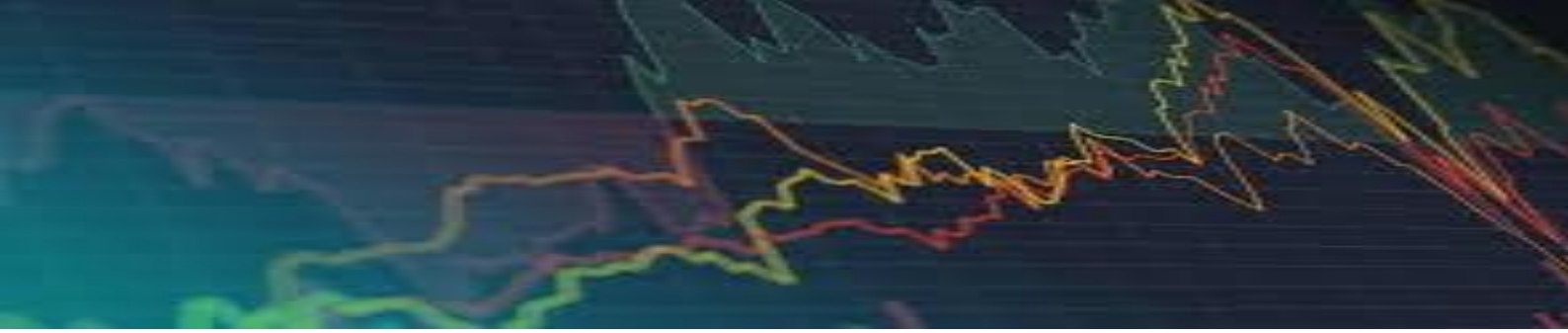
Marx's theory on commodity fetishism enshrines the narrative that, 'a commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood' (Marx, 1915, p.81). However, he argues that the application of value, which derives from the labour which has produced the commodity, conceptualises the trivial thing in relation to other commodities, oppose to the social relations that have produced it.

Therefore, the fetishisation of commodities results in, 'the magnitude of value by labour-time' becoming 'a secret'

and, thus, money 'actually conceals, instead of disclosing, the social character of private labour' (Marx, 1915, pp. 86-87; Billig, 1999). This is fundamental because, in order for commodities to evoke pleasure and construct identity, consumers must dismiss the labour relations involved in production, thereby characterising goods by the brand identity they represent rather than evaluating their inherent, exploitative nature (McCracken, 1986; Bauman, 1992). Implementing this conceptualisation reinforces the argument that, in order for corporations to generate surplus capital through *Pride*, the event must be fetishised by commodification, resulting in the estrangement from its original essence.

This estrangement of progressive movements within contemporary society represents exploitative chains of labour and the process of alienation. Marx's theory of alienation enshrines the notion that through commodification labour



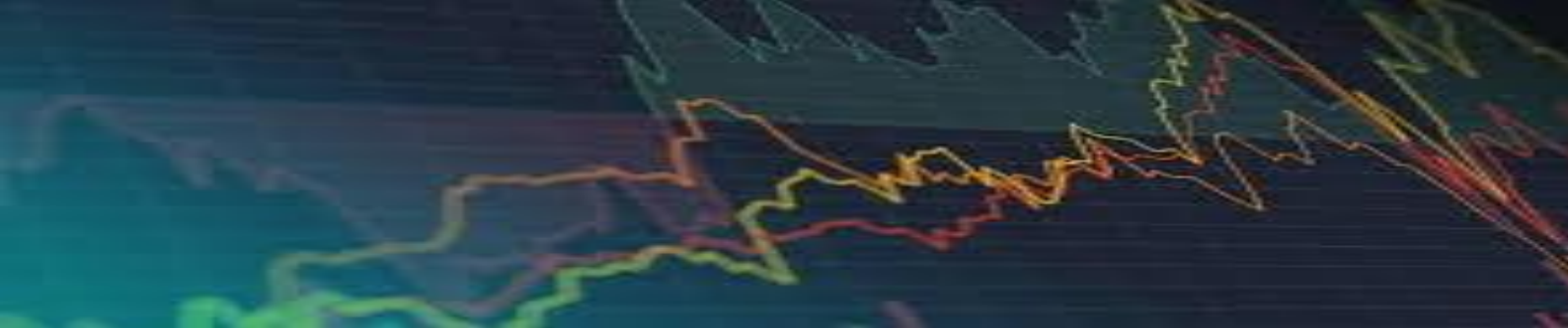


presents itself, the producer and the goods manufactured as commodities. This distortion of reality enables individuals to alienate themselves from social relationships, activities and from their labour. This alienation equates to the disillusionment of individuals sense of self and therefore, their essence. Within the context of *Pride*, alienation obstructs authentic social movements by distorting the essence of humanity that, consequently, hinders self-expression and thus, collective social bonds (Marx, 1915; Petrovic, 1963).

In conclusion, I supplied context to the emergence of consumer society through my analysis of neoliberalism, globalisation and commercialisation. Moreover, this enabled me to critically examine the manifestation of commodification in conjunction with *Pride* activism. Additionally, I presented the rainbow flag within a critical, postmodern evaluation to depict the symptoms the spectacle has on the facilitation of commodity fetishism. This conceptualisation highlighted the obstructive intersection of alienation and social movements. This constructed the argument that through commercialisation and commodification corporations portray distorted, ethical identities in order to capitalise off *Pride* leading to the estrangement and standardisation of the celebration.

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Pictures:

[Free Photo | Rear view of young woman waving rainbow flag \(freepik.com\)](#)

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