

Rights at Retail

The Impact of Corporations on Feminism, Queer Rights, and the Movement for Gender Equity

Al Cusack

Abstract

Corporations are increasingly pressured by the public to effect positive change in the world through corporate social responsibility. The resulting involvement of corporations in sociopolitical activities has an impact on the movements themselves. One such cause that has seen increasing corporate backing since the 1970s is the gender equity movement, including its subsections feminism and queer rights.¹ These political movements have been shaped and molded by the corporate dollar since being deemed profitable. Identity and activism has become a product bought and sold to big brands with deep pockets.² Events once meant to concentrate political power for radical change have become consumer based spectacles.³ The general public, who once condemned the radicalism of gender equity, have come to embrace the capitalist renditions of this movement. Male, heterosexual, and cisgender individuals at the intersect of other privileged identities are attending Pride celebrations and feminist events despite those events not being meant for their participation.⁴ The corporations investing in these events see privileged people as valuable and attempt to draw them in by lowering levels of political action. The once rare presence of privileged allies has become commonplace. However, it is difficult to call privileged consumers of corporate gender equity allies to radical sociopolitical activism when their presence at events is driven less by a willingness to engage with radicalism and more by a desire to participate in feel-good festivals crafted by corporate investment. The target of this new corporatized gender equity movement has changed from the oppressed and disadvantaged to the valued customer. This causes the movement to stray from its original purpose.⁵ Once radical sociopolitical movements have become less about tangible action and more about gaining the support of those deemed as valuable by corporations to make advertising at these events more profitable. Events that were intended to have a purely sociopolitical purpose have changed to accommodate corporate interests, most notably Pride Marches and the Pink Ribbon campaign.⁶

¹ Elisabeth Prugl, "Neoliberalising Feminism." *New Political Economy* 1, no. 4 (2004), <http://www.tandfonline.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/doi/abs/10.1080/13563467.2014.951614>

² Peter Wendy, "Pink Dollars, White Collars: Queer as Folk, Valuable Viewers, and the Price of Gay TV." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 28, no. 3 (2010), <http://www.tandfonline.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/doi/abs/10.1080/15295036.2011.559478>

Andi Zeisler, "Do these Underpants make me Look Feminist?" in *We Were Feminists Once*. (United States of America: Public Affairs, 2016), 59-80.

³ Steven M. Kates, "The Meaning of Lesbian and Gay Pride Day: Resistance through Consumption and Resistance to Consumption." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 30, no. 4 (2001), <http://jce.sagepub.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/content/30/4/392.full.pdf+html>

⁴ Peter Wendy, "Pink Dollars, White Collars: Queer as Folk, Valuable Viewers, and the Price of Gay TV." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 28, no. 3 (2010), <http://www.tandfonline.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/doi/abs/10.1080/15295036.2011.559478>

⁵ Andi Zeisler, "Do these Underpants make me Look Feminist?" in *We Were Feminists Once*. (United States of America: Public Affairs, 2016), 59-80.

⁶ India Ross, "The business of gay pride." *Financial Times* 1, no. 5 (2016), <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/docview/1818559282?OpenUrlRefId=info:xri/sid:wcdiscovery&accountid=1461>

Jane Ward, "Producing Pride in West Hollywood: A Queer Cultural Capital for Queers with Cultural Capital." *Sexualities* 8, no. 1 (2003), <http://sex.sagepub.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/content/6/1/65.full.pdf+html>

Andi Zeisler, "Introduction" in *We Were Feminists Once*. (United States of America: Public Affairs, 2016), ix-xvi.

Through an exploration of literature, this paper explores the ways in which corporations have come to embrace the gender equity movement, made it profitable through commodification and commercialization, drawing the masses to the movement, and diluted the political missions of feminism and queer rights.

Introduction

With the rise of public interest in human rights comes the rise of corporate capitalism's interest in human rights. For better or for worse, corporations have become more involved in human rights movements and are influencing the ways these movements operate and the way that they are accepted by the general public⁷. One such movement is the movement for gender equity. Gender equity movements encompass both feminism and the queer rights movement, as both movements deal with the rights of people facing marginalization because of their gender. It is worth exploring how, exactly, corporations impact the movement for gender equity because it is possible that corporate influence is changing the effectiveness of these human rights movements.

Corporate interest in gender equity has been on the rise since the 1970s⁸, an era when many major gains in gender equity occurred and public acceptance of the movements was growing. Corporations are finding more reasons to be, or, at least, appear to be, inclusive to people of all genders and supportive of movements that lobby for the rights of people of marginalized genders. This high level of corporate involvement has resulted in the movements being influenced, bended and moulded, to suit the needs of their corporate sponsors. In this way, gender equity is being commercialized and commodified⁹. The process of commercialization is occurring as these movements are increasingly being shaped into advertising tools for corporations¹⁰. Furthermore, they are being commodified as corporations form and sell the brand of being a feminist or a queer rights advocate¹¹. Many people are embracing these movements because corporations have made them more accessible to the masses, although at the cost of the radical human rights oriented action¹².

Corporations aim to use gender equity to make their companies seem socially engaged and responsible to the public¹³. Thus, they dilute the radical and action oriented political language of human rights to make gender equity understandable to the public and therefore a viable marketing tool¹⁴. When this occurs, more people are able to engage with these topics of human rights, but those people are often those for whom the movements were not intended. Heterosexual, white, able bodied, cisgender men are becoming most engaged with commodified and commercialized gender equity movements. Even when cisgender women and trans people are being engaged, it is often those at the intersects of privileged identities that find themselves represented and validated by the new corporate rendition of gender equity¹⁵. This is straying away from the purpose of gender equity as being a movement for the disadvantaged in society.

⁷ Heather Eisenstein, "A Dangerous Liaison? Feminism and Corporate Globalization," *Science and Society* 69, no. 3 (2005), http://www.jstor.org.proxy.hil.unb.ca/stable/40404269?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

⁸ Elisabeth Prugl, "Neoliberalising Feminism." *New Political Economy* 1, no. 4 (2004), <http://www.tandfonline.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/doi/abs/10.1080/13563467.2014.951614>

⁹ Andi Zeisler, "Do these Underpants make me Look Feminist?" in *We Were Feminists Once*. (United States of America: Public Affairs, 2016), 59-80.

¹⁰ Jane Ward, "Producing Pride in West Hollywood: A Queer Cultural Capital for Queers with Cultural Capital." *Sexualities* 8, no. 1 (2003), <http://sex.sagepub.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/content/6/1/65.full.pdf+html>

¹¹ Andi Zeisler, "Do these Underpants make me Look Feminist?" in *We Were Feminists Once*. (United States of America: Public Affairs, 2016), 59-80.

¹² Jane Ward, "Producing Pride in West Hollywood: A Queer Cultural Capital for Queers with Cultural Capital." *Sexualities* 8, no. 1 (2003), <http://sex.sagepub.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/content/6/1/65.full.pdf+html>

¹³ Steven M. Kates, "The Meaning of Lesbian and Gay Pride Day: Resistance through Consumption and Resistance to Consumption." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 30, no. 4 (2001), <http://jce.sagepub.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/content/30/4/392.full.pdf+html>

¹⁴ Jane Ward, "Producing Pride in West Hollywood: A Queer Cultural Capital for Queers with Cultural Capital." *Sexualities* 8, no. 1 (2003), <http://sex.sagepub.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/content/6/1/65.full.pdf+html>

¹⁵ Wendy Peters, "Pink Dollars, White Collars: Queer as Folk, Valuable Viewers, and the Price of Gay TV." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 28, no. 3 (2010), <http://www.tandfonline.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/doi/abs/10.1080/15295036.2011.559478>

With the dilution of radical and political language in gender equity movements by corporations and the pandering to privileged groups, the movement for gender equity has strayed away from its roots in twentieth century radicalism. For these reasons, it is clear that corporations have a profound impact on the movement for gender equity.

Corporate Involvement in Gender Equity Movements

Through increased demand from the public for corporate social responsibility, more companies have become involved in the gender equity movement¹⁶. Corporate involvement in gender equity movements allows the corporation to appear supportive of human rights. This becomes a selling point for their products and services. Companies will incorporate symbols of gender equity into their advertising or give money to gender equity movements in order to be able to advertise at their events¹⁷. This allows companies to appear to support gender equity movements and thus human rights generally. Many companies also discuss the way in which it is important to appear to support gender equity among their employees. It is suggested that inclusion makes a company more desirable to consumers and increases the satisfaction and loyalty of the employees.

When researching the impact of gender equity symbols on the opinions of consumers it is found that consumers over estimate the impact that is being had by the company and by themselves as consumers on progress towards gender equity¹⁸. When researching the influence that adding the brand of the Pink Ribbon to advertisements in 2015 it was found that people overestimate how much financial support companies with pink ribbons in their advertising were giving to breast cancer research or women's health generally. Consumers felt that they were helping to make much more progress in the field of women's health than they actually were by buying products with pink ribbons on them. The Pink Ribbon branding on the advertisement resulted in consumers having a more positive outlook on the brand as a whole. The 2015 study found that more positive thoughts about advertisements with Pink Ribbons in them were generated than comparable advertisements without Pink Ribbon imagery or allusions to support of women's health¹⁹.

Companies also find benefit in branding themselves with the rainbow Pride flag of the LGBTQIA+ community. Delta Airline and T-Mobile are only two of the hundreds of North American companies that sponsor queer Pride celebrations across the continent²⁰. Local companies to transnational corporations are willing to fork over a financial donation in order to ensure a float in a Pride Parade or a rainbow clad banner at a Pride Festival. The benefits of this are in segmenting their audiences²¹. This means that brands can appeal to people interested in human rights, while those who oppose LGBTQIA+ rights will often remain oblivious to the brand's support of queer rights movements. However, because brands often segment their audience when it comes to supporting gender equity in advertising, it is difficult to say whether the brand is fully supportive of human rights. They may simply wish to appear supportive of human rights. It can be argued that if a brand wanted to be fully supportive of gender equity they ought not be concerned with which parts of their audience are aware of their support.

¹⁶ Heather Eisenstein. "A Dangerous Liaison? Feminism and Corporate Globalization," *Science and Society* 69, no. 3 (2005), http://www.jstor.org.proxy.hil.unb.ca/stable/40404269?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

¹⁷ Andi Zeisler, "Do these Underpants make me Look Feminist?" in *We Were Feminists Once*. (United States of America: Public Affairs, 2016), 59-80.,

India Ross, "The business of gay pride." *Financial Times* 1, no. 5 (2016),

<http://search.proquest.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/docview/1818559282?OpenUrlRefId=info:xri/sid:wcdiscovery&accountid=14611>

¹⁸ Kim Bartel Sheethan, & Kati Tusinski Berg, "Thinking Pink? Consumer Reactions to Pink Ribbons and Vague Messages in Advertising." *Journal of Marketing and Communications* (2015),

<http://www.tandfonline.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/doi/full/10.1080/13527266.2015.1105280?scroll=top&needAccess=true>

¹⁹ Kim Bartel Sheethan, & Kati Tusinski Berg, "Thinking Pink? Consumer Reactions to Pink Ribbons and Vague Messages in Advertising." *Journal of Marketing and Communications* (2015),

<http://www.tandfonline.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/doi/full/10.1080/13527266.2015.1105280?scroll=top&needAccess=true>

²⁰ India Ross, "The business of gay pride." *Financial Times* 1, no. 5 (2016),

<http://search.proquest.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/docview/1818559282?OpenUrlRefId=info:xri/sid:wcdiscovery&accountid=14611>

²¹ Andrew Keating, "Understanding the Emergence of Markets: A Social Constructionist Perspective on Gay Economy." *Consumption Markets and Culture* 8, no. 2 (2007),

<http://www.tandfonline.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/doi/abs/10.1080/10253860500112842>

If corporate support of gender equity was about human rights, not corporate image, it is arguable that the corporations should be mobilizing their influence for social change whether or not their consumer base supports social change.

Corporations are not just concerned with appearing supportive of gender equity to their consumers. They are interested in appearing to support gender equity internally as well. Corporations are increasingly becoming interested in drafting company policies that allow their employees to bring their "whole selves" to work²². Research shows that companies where employees are encouraged to be themselves at work are more productive. Thus, companies are being encouraged to draft policies that mandate inclusiveness, especially inclusiveness towards the LGBTQIA+ community. Discrimination exists within corporate society, and it causes deteriorated mental and physical health among employees facing discrimination. This leads to a less productive work force. Therefore, companies find it valuable and socially responsible to have policies that combat discrimination²³.

Companies find economic value in combatting gender based discrimination internally. However, those companies that utilise activist spaces for advertising are not always doing the leg work of creating a space within their company that has reduced gender based discrimination. In some companies, financially supporting a Pride Parade or giving to the Pink Ribbon Campaign is seen as enough of a contribution to gender equity and the company fails to look at its own actions to find its own complicity in discrimination. Take the cosmetics industry. Cosmetics companies will often partner with breast cancer awareness groups or breast cancer research funds²⁴. This makes the company appear to be in support of women's health. However, these companies will sell products that contain carcinogens, and use the Pink Ribbon Campaign as a brand to advertise these carcinogenic products. Furthermore, the cosmetics industry is guilty of perpetuating unattainable beauty standards for women which contributes to a whole slew of societal challenges including enforcement of unrealistic dress codes for women. In this way, many cosmetics companies are appropriating the brand of human rights without taking actual action to protect human rights.

Commodification and Commercialization of Gender Equity

The increased involvement of corporations in the movement for gender equity has resulted in the movement becoming commodified and commercialized. Commodification and commercialization allow corporations to profit off of disadvantaged groups and their allies by turning the struggle for gender equity into a brand that can be bought and sold. Commodification is the transformation of an idea into a brand or item used for trade. Commercialization is the process of introducing that brand to the public as a viable product. Corporations view people who face discrimination based on their gender as consumers, and use the brand of gender equity as a means of accessing their business. This is problematic because this gives corporations the power to define the terms in the fight for gender equity, allowing corporations to choose whose struggles get validated or not.

Gender equity as a movement has been commodified because it has been turned into a brand by corporations. This has occurred as corporations start to view gender equity movements as profitable. They choose different ideas and symbols from the movement to adopt and then incorporate aspects of those into their branding. This brand is then used to define who gets to be a "real" member of different communities, such as feminists or queer folk. Companies sell clothing that is intended to make a person "look like a feminist". One example is the full white underwear made by an independent underwear company that says "feminist" across the butt²⁵.

²² Michelle Fullerton. "Diversity and Inclusion – LGBT Inclusion Means Business," Strategic HR Review 12, no. 3 (2013), <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/docview/1630051976?OpenUrlRefId=info:xri/sid:wcdiscovery&accountid=14611>

²³ Eden B. King and Jose M. Cortina, "The Social and Economic Imperative of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered Supportive Organizational Policies." Industrial and Organizational Psychology 3, no. 1 (2010), <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/doi/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2009.01201.x/abstract;jsessionid=D5770778318018C3DDA0676E1B1A7761.f01t04>

²⁴ Pheadra C. Pezzullo, "Resisting National Breast Cancer Awareness Month: The Rhetoric of Counterpublics and their Cultural Performance." Quarterly Journal of Speech 89, no. 4 (2003), <http://web.b.ebscohost.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/ehost/detail/detail?sid=15466cf8-29e6-4ab5-b9fa-6706f01c6059%40sessionmgr104&vid=0&hid=116&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWVhc3QtbGl2ZSZZY29wZT1zaXRl#AN=12021472&db=ufh>

²⁵ Andi Zeisler, "Do these Underpants make me Look Feminist?" in *We Were Feminists Once*. (United States of America: Public Affairs, 2016), 59-80.

The idea with this underwear is to appeal to the corporate brand of feminism that puts the appearance of comfort over the appearance of pleasing men.

It does not further the feminist cause to brand "true feminists" as being women who only wear full white underwear. In fact, it does the opposite of being a proponent of feminism to tell women what they ought to wear. When full white underwear is termed as feminist underwear then that gives corporations control over the brand of feminists. It allows corporations to say one type of underwear is acceptable for feminists to wear and this type of underwear is not. And that, if you want to be a feminist, you must redesign your entire wardrobe around it. That is inherently anti-feminist. By turning feminism into a brand corporations can control what and who is considered part of that brand. Thus, they can buy and sell the label of feminism.

Similar situations arise in the case of commercializing human rights. Take, for example, the commercialization of Pride. Pride originated with commemorative events for the Stonewall Riots across the United States. They were meant to be anti-authority, human rights oriented, and celebratory of trans women of colour. Modern Pride celebrations in the Western World are characterized by rainbows, parties, speeches by authority figures, and a noticeable absence of people of colour. Pride has become much less radical than it was originally. Part of that is the way that Pride was moulded and formed for the corporate interest.

In order to grow, Pride festivals needed money. The key source of income became corporate sponsorship, which required Pride to commodify its image into something profitable. It was then commercialized as corporate sponsors began to market and sell symbols of Pride and queer and trans radicalism as part of their corporate brand. The Rainbow Flag has become a staple of many companies' brands, including companies that openly give money to political candidates that oppose LGBTQIA+ human rights.

Pride Festivals worldwide have become less about memorializing the bravery of the founders of the movement and has become more of an advertising opportunity²⁶. As the event has been moulded to be less radical and political in its aims, it has become less accessible to the most marginalized members of the community. Pride Festivals are now heavily populated by heterosexual, cisgender males who face none of the oppression that the founders of the Pride movement were fighting against. While the presence of allies is beneficial in allowing people who are not out as LGBTQIA+ to attend Pride events, the massive dilution of human rights oriented events like Pride to become more advertisement focussed further marginalizes people at the intersects of several oppressed identities. People of colour, persons with disabilities, impoverished people, and trans people find themselves represented very little among the straight passing cis white gay men in corporate advertising. This is because, in order to connect with their general audience, corporations have to make the LGBTQIA+ community appear "normal" so that their support of LGBTQIA+ causes is acceptable to the general public.

Events that once featured radical, human rights oriented language now feature large billboards and advertisements for corporations. The language of human rights has been diluted in order to make these events viable advertising opportunities that will appeal to large consumer bases. To include radical human rights language would alienate consumers that have no stake in human rights movements. Liberal moderates could find such strong political stances by companies off-putting. Therefore, companies find it more valuable to make these human rights oriented events less about political human rights action and more about joy and kindness. While these are very pleasant things to be promoting and celebrating, they do not get at the political action that gender equity movements were originally looking for.

Popularizing

Gender equity as a movement has become more embraced by the public since the 1970s, and public acceptance of this movement continues to rise²⁷. While it is difficult to determine definitive causation, this popularizing of gender equity correlates to corporate interest in gender equity. In addition, the popularizing of gender equity correlates to the dilution of radical human rights oriented language and actions in the movement.

²⁶ India Ross, "The business of gay pride." *Financial Times* 1, no. 5 (2016), <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/docview/1818559282?OpenUrlRefId=info:xri/sid:wcdiscovery&accountid=1461>

²⁷ Heather Eisenstein. "A Dangerous Liaison? Feminism and Corporate Globalization," *Science and Society* 69, no. 3 (2005), http://www.jstor.org.proxy.hil.unb.ca/stable/40404269?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

One approach is to say that the efforts by corporations to make gender equity movements more politically neutral has made gender equity more accessible to the public. However, the people who are increasingly interested in gender equity are the people at the intersects of multiple privileged identities, and not the oppressed people for whom the movement was intended²⁸.

Gender equity as a movement is meant to be intersectional, existing to aid those who are oppressed even within communities oppressed by their gender. Gender equity ought to be serving people of colour, impoverished people, and people with disabilities, in addition to people who are oppressed because of their gender. This is how the queer rights movement started, with trans women of colour standing up against the authority of police. And, while at its roots feminism was about white, middle class, cisgender women, the movement has evolved to recognize the need to support more disadvantaged women. Corporate renditions of the gender equity movement, however, do not take such a progressive view.

The queer rights movement, often credited as being founded by trans women of colour at the Stonewall Inn, gives little credit to trans women of colour, or any disadvantaged member of the LGBTQIA+ through corporate voices²⁹.

One corporate voice that has the privilege of validating or invalidating queer identities is the mass media. The television series *Queer as Folk* helps to illustrate the way in which corporations have ignored disadvantaged queer people in the name of maximizing profit. The television series *Queer as Folk* was designed to give the non-queer community a glimpse into the queer lifestyle. The network was seeking the financial support of both queer and non-queer people. However, those that were represented, validated, and normalized in the show were almost exclusively white, cisgender, able bodied, straight-passing, middle class men. These people, while facing societal oppression for being gay, are still at the intersect of several privileged identities. The show does very little to normalize, validate, or celebrate people at the intersects of oppressed identities, such as trans women of colour³⁰.

Many supporters of commercialized Pride Festivals are also people at the intersects of privileged identities. This is happening at the expense of people who are highly marginalized. Reducing the action oriented human rights focus of Pride Festivals when there is so much more work to be done makes people from highly marginalized groups feel abandoned by the movement. When corporation manipulate the message of gender equity movements to make the message more neutral and appealing to a broader audience, the movement becomes less about action. This harms members of the movement who desperately need action to occur.

There absolutely are benefits to gender equity becoming more popular. The movement has garnered more attention in the last decades. Feminism and queer rights movements no longer exist on the fringe of society, and are in fact creeping into the mainstream of public discourse. Celebrities and politicians are embracing the title of feminist and are marching in Pride Parades. The public at large adorns their Facebook profile photos with rainbows to celebrate gains made in the queer community. More companies and individuals are using human rights language as a proud staple in their conversations, rather than as a mark of ostracized radicalism. This shift in public discussion and opinion allows gains to be made on behalf of marginalized communities.

However, the gains being made are ones that are sellable, both as brands and as ideologies. Popular feminist issues in corporate capitalist society includes pay equality. An important issue, but the discourse around pay equity often ignores the struggles of women at the intersects of various disadvantaged identities. The Supreme Court ruling in the United States legalizing same sex marriage was seen as a major win for the queer community, but that, too, is an issue in which the discourse often focusses on the privileged. The popularizing of gender equity movements sees more individuals and corporations focussing on these kinds of issues while ignoring larger societal problems, such as the labour exploitation of undocumented immigrant women or LGBTQIA+ youth homelessness. These issues are not as attractive for corporations to champion, and thus corporations and the publics that follow them assume the fight is over once same sex marriage has been won.

²⁸ Wendy Peters, "Pink Dollars, White Collars: Queer as Folk, Valuable Viewers, and the Price of Gay TV." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 28, no. 3 (2010), <http://www.tandfonline.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/doi/abs/10.1080/15295036.2011.559478>

²⁹ Jane Ward, "Producing Pride in West Hollywood: A Queer Cultural Capital for Queers with Cultural Capital." *Sexualities* 8, no. 1 (2003), <http://sex.sagepub.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/content/6/1/65.full.pdf+html>

³⁰ Wendy Peters, "Pink Dollars, White Collars: Queer as Folk, Valuable Viewers, and the Price of Gay TV." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 28, no. 3 (2010), <http://www.tandfonline.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/doi/abs/10.1080/15295036.2011.559478>

Additionally, the language of human rights is being used frivolously by companies to make it appear the company is supporting human rights. When language and symbols about the Pink Ribbon Campaign are used, people overestimate the contributions the companies are making to women's health. Companies are using human rights based language in other capacities with presumably similar intentions.

In a 2016 CoverGirl advertisement, the first male CoverGirl model James Charles says "Today is a great day for lash equality." The equals sign is used, which is a symbol of the Human Rights Campaign and is general seem as a symbol for equal rights. The use of the word "equality" and the equals symbol could cause viewers to associate CoverGirl with human rights. The use of this language and symbolism is implicit of a greater public and corporate interest in appearing to be supportive of human rights movements. It makes people who are highly privileged feel good to think that by supporting CoverGirl they are supporting some kind of human rights movement, but the ambiguity of the language allows them to not commit to supporting a specific radical human rights action.

Changing the Movement

Gender equity as a movement being commercialized, commodified, and popularized is harmless so long as that process does not effect the goals of the movement. Unfortunately, it is more likely that the influence of corporations on queer rights and feminism is making the movements less effective at causing sociopolitical change. Gender equity becoming more popular among corporations means that the label is less about tangible human rights action and more of a "consumer choice"³¹. This means that gender equity and the rights of people of oppressed genders are seen as optional, a decision to be made by each individual consumer. Furthermore, the involvement of corporations in gender equity movements results in the focus of the movement shifting from tangible political action to the crafting of a for profit brand.

Corporations attempt to silence criticisms of their corporate practices through corporate social responsibility. This entails making it appear that the corporation is supporting human rights in some capacity. However, corporate social responsibility does not necessarily equal tangible human rights action. Corporations are able to use this concept to gain favour with consumers and critics, making it appear that they are effecting positive change, while continuing to serve their own agenda³².

One attempt at corporate social responsibility that fails to provide actual progress on the issue of gender equity is sponsoring Pride Festivals. Sponsoring a Pride celebration, a staple of the queer rights movement since Stonewall, may seem like a good way to support queer rights. But when corporations support Pride they do so in a way that maximizes their profit and minimizes their social impact. Corporations compartmentalize their consumer audiences so that they do not have to answer to consumers that oppose queer rights but are still able to profit off consumers that support queer rights³³.

In addition to compartmentalizing their audiences to avoid having to alienate some consumers in the name of queer rights, corporations also change the focus of Pride events when they offer their money. Once a radical, human rights focussed event celebrating and advocating for trans women of colour, modern Pride celebrations have little to do with advocating for human rights. Corporations have diluted the human rights focussed language to make Pride celebrations more neutral. They focus, instead of on promoting human rights, on promoting joy and kindness³⁴. While this is a lovely message it does very little for actually effecting sociopolitical change that the queer community needs in order to combat mass discrimination. Corporations do this because joy and kindness is a much more accessible message to liberal moderate audiences than the call for radical human rights action would be. In this way, corporations are changing the queer rights movement in order to make it profitable. As a result, the queer rights movement has strayed from its original purpose of making radical political demands on behalf of oppressed queer and trans folk.

³¹ Andi Zeisler, "Do these Underpants make me Look Feminist?" in *We Were Feminists Once*. (United States of America: Public Affairs, 2016), 59-80.

³² Elisabeth Prugl, "Neoliberalising Feminism." *New Political Economy* 1, no. 4 (2004), <http://www.tandfonline.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/doi/abs/10.1080/13563467.2014.951614>

³³ India Ross, "The business of gay pride." *Financial Times* 1, no. 5 (2016), <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/docview/1818559282?OpenUrlRefId=info:xri/sid:wcdiscovery&accountid=1461>

³⁴ Jane Ward, "Producing Pride in West Hollywood: A Queer Cultural Capital for Queers with Cultural Capital." *Sexualities* 8, no. 1 (2003), <http://sex.sagepub.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/content/6/1/65.full.pdf+html>

First wave feminism was not as intersectional as the post-Stonewall queer rights movement. The Suffrage movement, one of the first major feminist protests in the United States, stood up for the rights of white, middle class women, and that demographic only. However, in the last few decades, as feminism evolved, it became clear that an intersectional approach was required in order to secure rights for all women, no matter their privileged or oppressed identities.

While feminists realized the importance of intersectionality, corporations have realized the profitability of feminism and have begun to selectively validate white feminists. Corporations use the title of feminism to create a brand which allows them to decide which feminists get validated and which do not. Often, it is the white, upper class, able bodied feminists that get to claim the corporate label while feminists that face other forms of oppression are seen as too radical. Being intersectional is seen as too complex, focussing on too many issues at a time, and is therefore too difficult of a concept to be profitable. For this reason, corporations choose to validate more privileged and “relatable” feminists, like Taylor Swift. While Swift has done well to popularize feminism among her fans, she focusses on issues that almost exclusively concern white women. To put only celebrities like Swift on the feminist pedestal is to prioritize the voices of privileged women over the voices of oppressed women.

Corporate involvement means that only white feminist issues that are not too radical or challenging to current social structures get focussed on. Such issues include pay equality for white women which, while very important, ignores the inequality that exists in pay among women.

Focussing on such small wins such as white women’s pay equality and gay marriage allow corporations to appear supportive of human rights movements without having to take a radical stance on the issues. This causes the movement for gender equity to change in its focus, from serving the oppressed to becoming a brand meant to help privileged consumers feel better about the products they buy without being involved in any sort of meaningful sociopolitical change.

Conclusion

The last few decades have seen corporation become increasingly involved in movements for gender based human rights. Queer rights movements and feminism have been commodified and commercialized by corporations. These movements have become brands that corporations buy and sell as a consumer choice. Corporations have diluted the language of human rights to make gender equity movements seem more accessible, and thus more profitable, to mass markets. Diluting this language helps to make gender based human rights more popular among people with privileged identities. However, the result is that there is change in the effectiveness and the approach that gender equity movements take to human rights. Instead of being radical and action based, gender equity movements are focussing on smaller, less radical issues. These issues are important but are also distracting from larger issues of inequity.

Corporations have a massive amount of power and influence in modern capitalist society. For movements like feminism, queer rights, and gender equity to achieve the goal of equitable rights for all oppressed peoples, there must be a change in the relationship between corporations and human rights activists. As it stands, human rights movements are only losing their values as human rights language is being used as empty promotional material. It is important, to return to the radical sociopolitical purpose of human rights movements, to demand more tangible, meaningful, and equitable action from corporations, and refocus on more radical issues.

Bibliography

- Eisenstein, Heather. "A Dangerous Liaison? Feminism and Corporate Globalization," *Science and Society* 69, no. 3 (2005), http://www.jstor.org.proxy.hil.unb.ca/stable/40404269?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents (accessed September 28, 2016)
- Fullerton, Michelle. "Diversity and Inclusion – LGBT Inclusion Means Business," *Strategic HR Review* 12, no. 3 (2013), <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/docview/1630051976?OpenUrlRefId=info:xri/sid:wediscovery&accountid=14611> (accessed December 27, 2016)
- Kates, Steven M. "The Meaning of Lesbian and Gay Pride Day: Resistance through Consumption and Resistance to Consumption." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 30, no. 4 (2001), <http://jce.sagepub.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/content/30/4/392.full.pdf+html> (accessed September 28, 2016)
- Keating, Andrew "Understanding the Emergence of Markets: A Social Constructionist Perspective on Gay Economy." *Consumption Markets and Culture* 8, no. 2 (2007), <http://www.tandfonline.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/doi/abs/10.1080/10253860500112842> (accessed September 28, 2016)
- King, Eden B. and Cortina, Jose M. "The Social and Economic Imperative of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered Supportive Organizational Policies." *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* 3, no. 1 (2010), <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/doi/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2009.01201.x/abstract;jsessionid=D5770778318018C3DDA0676E1B1A7761.f01t04> (accessed September 28, 2016)
- Peters, Wendy, "Pink Dollars, White Collars: Queer as Folk, Valuable Viewers, and the Price of Gay TV." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 28, no. 3 (2010), <http://www.tandfonline.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/doi/abs/10.1080/15295036.2011.559478> (accessed September 28, 2016)
- Pezzullo, Pheadra C., "Resisting National Breast Cancer Awareness Month: The Rhetoric of Counterpublics and their Cultural Performance." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 89, no. 4 (2003), <http://web.b.ebscohost.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/ehost/detail/detail?sid=15466cf8-29e6-4ab5-b9fa-6706f01c6059%40sessionmgr104&vid=0&hid=116&bddata=JnNpdGU9ZWWhvc3QtG12ZS5zY29wZT1zaXRl#AN=12021472&db=ufh> (accessed September 28, 2016)
- Prugl, Elisabeth, "Neoliberalising Feminism." *New Political Economy* 1, no. 4 (2004), <http://www.tandfonline.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/doi/abs/10.1080/13563467.2014.951614> (accessed September 28, 2016)
- Ross, India, "The business of gay pride." *Financial Times* 1, no. 5 (2016), <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/docview/1818559282?OpenUrlRefId=info:xri/sid:wediscovery&accountid=14611> (accessed September 28, 2016)
- Sheethan, Kim Bartel, & Tusinski Berg, Kati, "Thinking Pink? Consumer Reactions to Pink Ribbons and Vague Messages in Advertising." *Journal of Marketing and Communications* (2015), <http://www.tandfonline.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/doi/full/10.1080/13527266.2015.1105280?scroll=top&needAccess=true> (accessed December 27, 2016)
- Ward, Jane, "Producing Pride in West Hollywood: A Queer Cultural Capital for Queers with Cultural Capital." *Sexualities* 8, no. 1 (2003), <http://sex.sagepub.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/content/6/1/65.full.pdf+html> (accessed September 28, 2016)
- Zeisler, Andi. "Do these Underpants Make Me Look Feminist?" in *We Were Feminists Once*. United States of America: Public Affairs, 2016.