


When rainbows feel hollow

Reji Varghese and Harsh Verma decode pinkwashing, rainbow capitalism and performance allyship displayed by corporates.

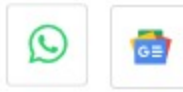
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A female graphic designer creating pride-themed artwork on her digital tablet. Credit: DH Photo

The practice of the month-long global celebration of Gay Pride Week began in late June 1970, a public celebration that marked the first anniversary of the violent police raid at New York's Stonewall Inn, a gay bar.

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At that time, LGBTQ+ people largely kept their identity and orientation quiet. The raid on the bar on June 28, 1969 sparked a series of protests and catalysed the movement for LGBTQ+ rights. In 1999, President Bill Clinton officially proclaimed June as Gay and Lesbian Pride Month.

As conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) gain traction in India, companies increasingly highlight their commitment to supporting marginalised communities, especially LGBTQ+ individuals. However, the rise of pinkwashing and performative allyship poses significant challenges to genuine progress. Often masquerading as support, these practices can dilute the impact of DEI efforts and even harm the communities they aim to help.

Understanding tokenism

Pinkwashing is when companies put on a facade of LGBTQ+ friendliness to hide/divert attention from their discriminatory or harmful practices. It's like waving a rainbow flag to hide a deeper, often less friendly reality.

Rukmini Iyer, founder of a leadership development and DEI company, says, "I would venture to say pinkwashing is ubiquitous. A lot of organisations around the world have adopted DEI policies because of the pressure of activism. So while they have policies and perhaps a few opportunities for LGBTQ+ individuals as a result, they do very little to shift the culture within to sustain the policies in action."

Performative allyship involves token gestures towards marginalised communities, that are more about appearance than action, to gain social capital. These acts often lack the meaningful efforts needed to address systemic issues. Often, the performative ally professes allegiance to distance themselves from potential scrutiny. In many cases, organisational leaders use performance-driven activity in a way that they believe will protect the company brand from being highlighted negatively.

"When organisations engage in such activities, it often brings a few LGBTQ+ folks into a workplace that's not ready for them. As a result, they face the usual challenges of their roles and the additional task of educating their peers, confronting biases, and advocating for their inclusion. These superficial efforts can do more harm than good," says Deepa Agarwal, a global DEI consultant.

Rainbow capitalism refers to the commercial exploitation of LGBTQ+ symbols to make profits. It often involves companies using LGBTQ+ imagery and slogans to market products, especially during Pride Month. Interestingly, companies indulging in Rainbow Capitalism tend to charge a hefty premium on these 'limited-edition' products.

"Don't be fooled by glitter! Look beyond the campaign. Scrutinise their practices: how many LGBTQ+ employees do they have? Who are their partners? Do they have inclusive policies in place? Numbers tell the real story. Look for concrete efforts, not just clicks," says Maira Q, DEI Lead at a prominent financial services firm.

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How to identify pinkwashing

- **Inconsistency:** If a company's public support does not match its internal practices, it may be pinkwashing. For example, a company that showcases LGBTQ+ pride during Pride Month but lacks inclusive policies year-round.
- **Lack of sustained effort:** Genuine support requires ongoing commitment. One-off events or campaigns without long-term initiatives are red flags.
- **Tokenism:** Highlighting a few individuals from marginalised groups as a show of diversity without broader structural changes indicates performative actions.
- **Profit-driven motives:** Support that seems more aimed at boosting sales or image than enacting real change often lacks authenticity.
- **Silence on critical issues:** Organisations or individuals who fail to speak out on key issues affecting marginalised communities may engage in performative allyship.

How pinkwashing manifests in daily life

A ridesharing company introduced gender-neutral options for riders in 2021, a move initially praised for its inclusivity. However, recently, its CEO referred to the use of gender-neutral pronouns as a "disease". This highlighted the disconnect between the company's public gestures of inclusivity and its internal culture, emphasising the performative nature of its earlier initiatives.

Many companies or organisations do this for their image; some may even actively participate in harming LGBTQ+ and other marginalised people. In 2022, a fast fashion brand's campaign during Pride Month was called 'My Chosen Family'. The concept of chosen families comes from the LGBTQ+ community because many in this community are unfortunately misunderstood and sometimes even ostracised by their blood relatives.

From the outside, the campaign felt heartwarming, shedding light on a distinctly queer experience. However, despite the company's supposed solidarity with the LGBTQ+ community, it was found to primarily use clothing suppliers in countries with various forms of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation where queer communities faced severe discrimination.

Many fashion brands have launched Pride-themed collections featuring clothing and accessories with rainbow motifs. While the products are priced higher, the proceeds or difference amounts are usually not donated to LGBTQ+ causes. The organisations lack significant policies to support LGBTQ+ employees and have used LGBTQ+ symbols for profit without genuine support for the community.

Many companies support the LGBTQ+ community only when it is easy to do so and helps in their marketing. The support can sometimes show up as logos appearing with a Rainbow Tint. Unsurprisingly, organisations practising pinkwashing rarely take concrete steps to help queer communities in terms of employment, inclusive policies, prevention of workplace harassment, health benefits and other aspects.

Need to be mindful

Pinkwashing, performative allyship, and rainbow capitalism can erode trust and credibility. Marginalised communities quickly recognise insincerity, which can lead to backlash and damage a brand's reputation.

"Beyond the impact on business, there is a moral obligation for corporations and individuals to contribute positively to society," says Shyam Konnur, LGBTQ+ rights activist and Mr. Gay India, 2020. "Superficial support undermines genuine efforts and perpetuates systemic inequalities, further marginalising the communities," he adds.

"Additionally, insincere actions can lead to increased scepticism and cynicism towards genuine DEI efforts, making it harder for authentic initiatives to gain traction. Performative actions may yield short-term benefits but do not contribute to lasting change, ultimately failing to create a truly inclusive environment," says Deepa Agarwal.

Combating pinkwashing

Continuous education and training on DEI issues for all employees, including leadership, are essential to combat these issues. Establishing clear, actionable policies that promote inclusivity and support marginalised communities, such as anti-discrimination policies, diversity hiring practices, and support networks, is crucial.

"If a large part of the organisation is not prepared, instead of engaging in performative allyship, they need to invest in internal processes of education, awareness, and sensitivity training so that they are truly ready to hire LGBTQ+ persons and work with them as colleagues without prejudice. Jumping into the metrics of DEI without preparing the culture for it backfires," says Rukmini Iyer.

Building authentic relationships with marginalised communities by listening to their needs, involving them in decision-making processes, and supporting their initiatives can foster genuine inclusion.

"DEI efforts should be part of a long-term strategy rather than one-off events, with measurable goals, regular progress tracking, and transparency about successes and areas needing improvement. Ensuring diverse representation at all levels of the organisation, especially in leadership roles, is vital," Deepa Agarwal says.

Aligning public statements and marketing campaigns with internal practices and policies builds credibility and trust. Regularly reviewing and assessing DEI initiatives, being open to feedback, and making necessary changes are key to maintaining integrity and trust.

Lastly, fostering a culture of genuine allyship within the organisation and encouraging employees to be active allies by providing resources and support for their DEI efforts can promote a culture of inclusion.

As corporations and individuals increasingly embrace DEI principles, it is vital to distinguish between genuine support and superficial actions. Pinkwashing, rainbow capitalism, and performative allyship can undermine true progress and harm marginalised communities. We can create a more inclusive and equitable workplace and society by being mindful of these practices and committing to authentic, sustainable action.

It is not enough to wear the symbols or speak the language of inclusion; companies must embody the principles in their actions and policies.

(Reji Varghese is an industrialist; Harsh Verma is a DEI specialist)

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