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True Colours or Rainbow-Washing Exposed!? – Company Pride in and through Digital and Social Media Reviewed

*Vraies couleurs ou rainbow-washing !? – La fierté des entreprises vue au
prisme des médias numériques et sociaux*

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True Colours or Rainbow-Washing Exposed!? – Company Pride in and through Digital and Social Media Reviewed

Vraies couleurs ou rainbow-washing !? – La fierté des entreprises vue au prisme des médias numériques et sociaux

Michaela Rusch

1. Introduction

- 1 Every June, the same scenario of displaying the rainbow flag in various shapes and combinations can be observed on companies' social media profiles across Europe and worldwide. It is the beginning of Pride Month—a month when members and allies of the LGBTQ+¹ community remember the 1969 riots (following the repeated police raids and investigations at *Stonewall Inn* located in Christopher Street / New York) that led to the first Christopher Street Day and one of the first public statements of a Pride March in New York in the same year (Bandera, 2022; Kaiser, 1997; D'Emilio, 2002: 146–53 for *Stonewall: Myth and Meaning*; Dubermann, 1993). The initial Rainbow Flag was created in 1978 by San Francisco artist Gilbert Baker (Stewart & Hamer, 1995; Dreyfus, 2015). It continues to be a symbol from the early stages of the Pride Marches until today (Bandera, 2022) and is displayed in many public spaces. The choice of the rainbow colours is not a coincidence as there is a deeper meaning behind it, as Morgan (2019) points out:

The different colours within the flag were meant to represent togetherness [*sic!*], since LGBT people come in all races, ages and genders, and rainbows are natural and beautiful. The original flag featured eight colors, each having a different meaning. At the top was hot pink, which represented sex, red for life, orange for

healing, yellow signifying sunlight, green for nature, turquoise to represent art, indigo for harmony, and finally violet at the bottom for spirit.

- 2 Out of this, “Pride”—as a term and concept—constitutes a political statement, as the mottos/slogans of various Pride Parades imply, e.g. Paris 2021: “Less talk, more rights”, Munich 2022: “Less me, more we” or Berlin 2019: “Stonewall 50 – Every riot starts with your voice”. These slogans relate to the complex and—often perceived as discriminatory—legal situation, for example, of Trans people as well as legislation regarding the adoption of children by same-sex couples. The last slogan, for instance, refers to the Stonewall riots as the starting point for the LGBTQ+ liberation movement. Apart from that, pride celebrations and marches have also become events where commercial interests have been established. This ambivalence shows in the relationship between “Pride and Money”—namely selling/distributing products from, for and by the LGBTQ+ community and thereby partially (or fully) commercialising the celebration of identity. Nevertheless, a contrast must be drawn between displaying the rainbow colours in LGBTQ+-related settings and their application for commercial or business-related purposes. In displaying the rainbow colours in LGBTQ+-related settings, they function as creating a “safe space for the community” by identifying its exclusiveness where people can meet in acceptant environments and openness towards their different forms of sexual identity. For companies, displaying the rainbow flag has become a marketing feature to be added to their logos, predominantly during Pride Month; in almost all publicly available spaces such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok or even the company facilities (Figures 7 and 8). As diversity is playing an increasing role in business communication, the former more conservative and traditional settings, such as the nuclear family, for example, in advertising, appear to have changed. Visibility of LGBTQ+ characters—predominantly through social and legal change within the past decades (David, 1997; D’Emilio, 2002)—slowly leads to a more complex portrayal of them on many levels in media and films (Fried & Oprea, 2023). The previous high obstacle to advertising with and for LGBTQ+ characters now appear less of an issue for companies. The following quote stresses that notion and points out that, for example, the French public transport SNCF supports the LGBTQ+ agenda, referring to Stonewall and its legacy.

Le 17 mai dernier, à l’occasion de la journée internationale de lutte contre les LGBTphobies, plusieurs dizaines de gares avaient déjà pavisées aux couleurs du rainbow flag. « On voulait marquer le coup à l’occasion de l’anniversaire des émeutes de Stonewall », nous avait à l’époque déclaré le patron du service presse de la SNCF Loïc Leuliette, joint par téléphone. *C’est un partenariat historique avec Gare!, et nous en sommes très très fiers.* (Tanguy, 2019)

Figure 1. – TGV in rainbow colours.

SNCF

It turns out that it's not just the British train operators who are keen to fly the six-striped rainbow flag! The French national railway operator, SNCF, launched their own TGV trainbow in 2019.



Dunn (n.d.).

Figure 2. – Rainbow flags at DHL company site.



Photo Credit: Getty Images Jeremy Moeller.

- 3 Employing certain symbols (from the LGBT community) for marketing reasons is not new. In times of immense pressure to potentially increase the selling numbers of products, companies need to find ways to re-create a product profile. A comparable but

slightly more implicit marketing instrument—on a larger scale—had already been coined as a term in the mid-1980s as the *Pink Pound*. With the introduction of the Euro in 2002, the concept was adapted to the *Pink Euro*. The general idea was to sell any product by and through the queer community (also see David, 1997: 267). After a while, concern was brought up caused by the relatively complex relationship between the LGBTQ+ community and commercial interests, as shown in the quote below.

The pink pound is not what you think it is; or, rather, I want to convince you that it's a lot more than you think it is. Depending on whom you think has most agency in commercial relationships, the pink pound (or pink economy) has generally been defined as the spending power of gay men and lesbians, or as an increasingly lucrative target market courted by some savvy marketers. (Bengry, 2018)

- 4 Although Bengry (2018) avoids direct criticism, their approach nevertheless “[...] lucrative target market courted by some savvy marketers [...]” points out the commercial dimension that does not necessarily reflect more acceptance. Perhaps there seems to be little doubt that customers tend to buy products more likely once they identify with them—this exemplifies the *Pink Pound* and *Rainbow Marketing*. Therefore, it leads to the question: Do companies’ deeds speak louder than words in taking responsibility when using distinct symbols and flags? Queer or LGBTQ+ customers, in particular, might question the company and structures of the respective businesses if they actually offer an LGBTQ+-sensitive environment to their employees and clients, apart from marketing and distributing rainbow-coloured products and pride-related advertisements. Are they advocating traditional values regarding the family as the model, or are they also including rainbow families? This approach in marketing “for commercial purposes only” cannot be equalised with genuine support. Therefore, this article aims to discuss and analyse how companies use rainbow flags and the like to apply them in target group marketing. After this introduction, the methodology will be mapped out, followed by a part of defining the concept and terminology of rainbow-washing to then portraying the analysis results and a discussion to differentiate between the practice of rainbow-washing and genuine allyship by companies. The paper will close by pointing out, on the one hand, its limitations and, on the other hand, a conclusion.

2. Methodology and data

- 5 The data set for the initial analysis consists of a random selection of examples based on a preliminary research framework for text retrieval that includes hashtags by companies as well as individuals on Instagram and written statements from company social media accounts and websites but in a marginal number. The approach is experimental and qualitative, using evaluation measures of semantics and discourse analysis. The study remains to be preliminary throughout, attempting to evaluate selected samples with regard to their value as potential sources for text retrieval for further investigation. Currently, the texts have not been investigated using software such as *AntConc*² due to the qualitative approach focusing more on the description of features. Nevertheless, such an analysis might be used in further studies when larger numbers of data are investigated in an exclusively corpus-based approach (Baker, 2006). Regarding the procedure of handling the data, the author picked rather prominent examples and discussed them within the frame of rainbow-washing as a concept and partly investigated them by comparing them in their phrasing.

3. Rainbow-washing: concept and terminology

- 6 It is necessary to analyse some statements on *rainbow-washing* in greater detail, to define the phenomenon more precisely. Therefore, approaches towards the concept from different perspectives will be provided. The term itself is relatively new and partly related to jargon or slang. So, the Urban Dictionary (2015) perhaps allows a first and fruitful insight and gives the following definition of *rainbow-washing*:

The act of using or adding rainbow colors and/or imagery to advertising, apparel, accessories, landmarks, et cetera, in order to indicate progressive support for LGBTQ equality (and earn consumer credibility)—but with a minimum of effort or pragmatic result. (Akin to “green-washing” with environmental issues and “pink-washing” with breast cancer.) LGBTQ LGBT Slacktivism hacktivism pride gay pride LGBTQ pride. [...]³

- 7 The definition above not only provides the recipient with information on the frame and features of the term; moreover, it draws the connection to other credibility-decreasing phenomena like *green-washing* and *pink-washing* in relation to companies. Paefgen-Laß (2021) adds another perspective to illustrate the practices related to rainbow-washing:

The rainbow dominates the top trends in June: companies, institutions, associations, celebrities, they all join the declarations of solidarity for the LGBTQIA+ community during Pride month with more or less creative actions. Big fashion brands launch Pride collections, and quite a few of them, like Levi’s, Happy Socks or H+M, support non-profit organisations working for the rights of the community with the proceeds. The toy manufacturer Lego sells gender-neutral plastic figures in rainbow sets under the motto *Everyone is Awesome*. And German car manufacturers are sending a signal against homophobia, racism and intolerance with rainbow-coloured perimeter advertising in stadiums. In short, companies are positioning themselves as shapers of a prejudice-free and diverse society.⁴ (Working translation)

- 8 Especially in the last sentence, Paefgen-Laß (2021) stresses that the companies (and corporates) are attempting to position themselves here. The rainbow flag, as stated before, inherits a broader political meaning. Moreover, showing these particular colours means taking a general political stance (Niculescu, 2022) for support *throughout* the year, not just when it suits particular marketing purposes in June. In this connection the company culture of the individual companies could also be questioned. With diversity awareness becoming an important aspect of communication between customers and employees, companies are repeatedly interrogated about whether these diversity strategies apply to both sides. (Niculescu, 2022; Gutierrez, Montiel, Surroca & Tribo, 2022). Companies that use and display pride-related images must also deliver this openness and tolerance within the company.
- 9 Regarding this matter, allyship is not about the corporation as such (Della Valle, 2020); it goes beyond. For example, in how far corporations or companies communicate and initiate support for groups like the *Trevor Project*⁵ for queer youth or the *Terrence Higgins Trust*⁶—UK’s leading HIV and sexual health charity, *Stonewall UK*⁷, *ACT UP* (various branches in different countries), *Central LGBT Paris*⁸. When using the rainbow in their marketing, companies like VW, BMW or Coca-Cola need to be aware of its meaning, their responsibility and their credibility—in their home countries as well as abroad. The rainbow colours reflect a lot more, as there are still countries⁹ where LGBTQ+ people

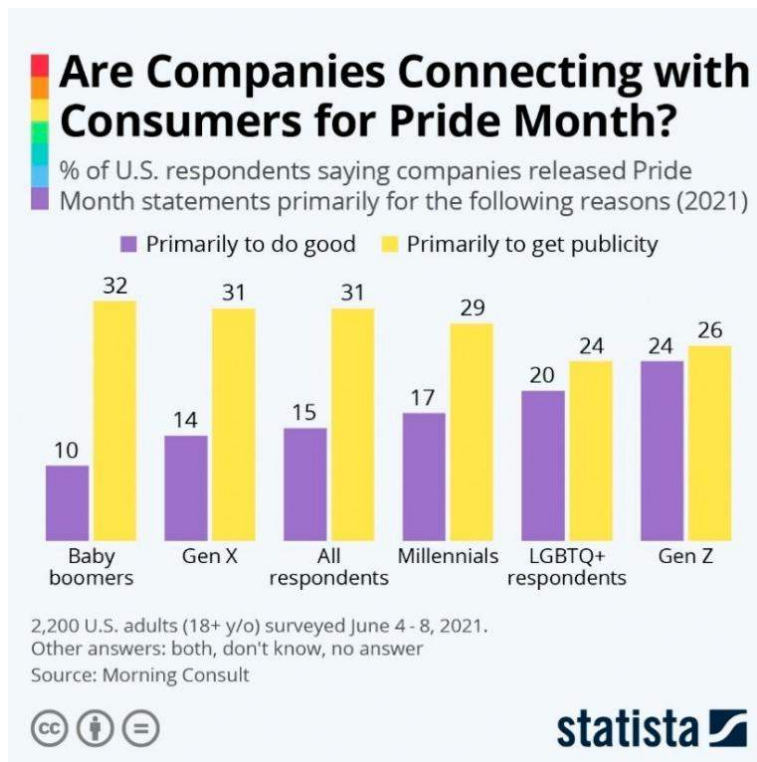
are put in jail, or are executed. Companies like VW, BMW or Coca-Cola sell goods in these countries, too. Therefore, it remains essential to stress that “[w]ith all the colorful celebrations it’s easy to forget that there are still horrible fates for LGBT people across the world and [that] LGBT youth suicide data is extremely concerning” (Della Valle, 2020; on statistics also see The Trevor Project¹⁰). On a more general scale *rainbow-washing* as a concept does not exclusively reflect being unaware towards the LGBTQ+ theme on the companies’ side. Reflecting more closely on it, it appears partly as a well-established marketing pattern while negative aspects are to some extent excluded. Some companies are aware of their double standard, and some are (possibly) not.

- ¹⁰ Repeatedly, people on social media, e.g. Instagram and Twitter, refer to the display of rainbow colours and flags on company products. Therefore, this paper looks at nine samples (further referred to as cases 4.1 to 4.9) in a preliminary analysis related to a selected number of hashtags and posts on social media, e.g. accounts of companies, corporates, and company websites, to analyse, compare and reflect upon one another. Different Instagram posts by individuals—perhaps potential customers—are quoted to identify reactions to campaigns of companies and corporates. The comment section offers more perspectives on the reception of pride marketing strategies than analogue displays, such as rainbow flags on company facilities and investigating companies’ and corporates’ social media accounts. This comment section often reveals quite a unique insight as potential customers speak their minds, as will be seen later in the analysis. As a result, the author aims to show how rainbow-washing is detected, communicated, and criticised. The study also provides some examples of genuine support in contrast.

4. Results: reviewing marketing practices

- ¹¹ After giving a detailed introduction on the frame of rainbow-washing and providing the details for the analysis, the next section will present and comment on the analysis results in nine cases, 4.1 to 4.9. As a starting point, the following figure, “Are Companies Connecting with Consumers for Pride Month?” indicates the *group* and their *reaction* to Pride Month messages/statements in 2021 among US respondents. The numbers indicate that the perceived messages tend to lean more toward “Primarily to get publicity” than “Primarily to do good”. Regarding the different generations of remarkable trend can be observed as the LGBTQ+ responders and GenZ seem to opt out of the clear tendency of this chart compared to the other generations.

Figure 3. – Are Companies Connecting with Consumers for Pride Month?



Buchholz (2022).

- 12 In connection to this, the following picture provides examples of typical rainbow-coloured products, including *IKEA*, *Listerine*, *Dr. Martens* and *Bubly*. In the case of these brands, a positive trend could be observed. For customers buying these products might be something to help fulfil the need of feeling related. As it is reflected in the following quote: “Pride relates to a feeling of comfort and accomplishment in oneself and ones’ community” (Wolowic, Heston, Saewyc, Porta & Eisenberg, 2017).

Figure 4. – Rainbow-themed products launched for Pride Month in support of the LGBT community (IKEA, Listerine, Dr. Martens, Bubly).



Della Valle (2020).

- 13 For younger *queer* people, allyship plays an important role. Perhaps being still in the coming-of-age phase, it might be easier to relate to a product in the respective colours instead of officially declaring oneself as part of the LGBTQ+ community. As Wolowic, Heston, Saewyc, Porta and Eisenberg (2017) point out in the following quote:

Rainbow-related discussions with youth followed five themes. First, young people chose to display the symbol to disclose their affiliation with lesbian, gay, bisexual,

transgender and queer communities to strangers, friends, family and authority figures.

- 14 This behaviour can lead to a problematic situation for queer / LGBTQ+ customers (Patel, 2022). On the one hand, supporting the cause might seem a favourable deed.

The implications of these limits mean in the process of being cautious, young people are often making an effort to verify the purpose of the symbol's display when they navigate communities, businesses, schools and individuals. (Wolowic, Heston, Saewyc, Porta & Eisenberg, 2017)

- 15 On the other hand, companies often invest less in the cause than customers might think. Companies must prove that they are inclined towards diversity and inclusion, not only on paper but in their daily practice regarding company structure, management and representation which is also reflected in Figure 3. According to the list below, Paefgen-Laß (2021) maps out actual fields to focus on:

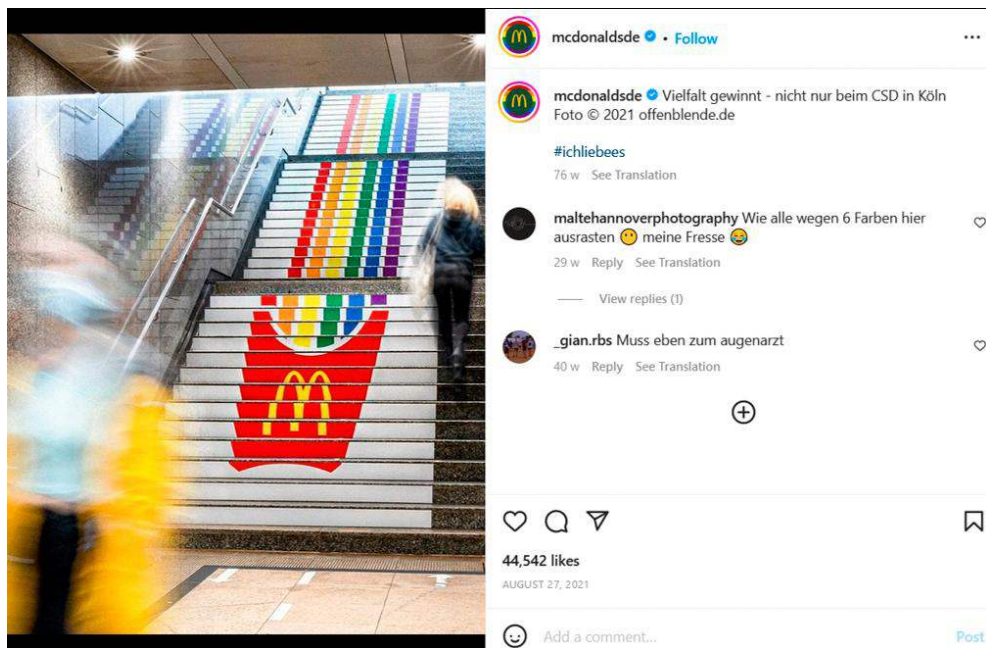
[...] In the four categories of corporate organisation, HR and recruiting, communication and visibility, and legal framework and regulations, the study examined, among other things:

- Whether and how employee networks are supported,
- the level of participation in special LGBT+ events, even in times of Corona,
- the provision of training and awareness raising to employees,
- inclusive language in internal and external communications,
- signing LGBT+ supportive declarations,
- dealing with LGBT+ discrimination in the workplace. [...].¹¹ (Working translation)

- 16 As the initial question of Figure 3 implies, companies would usually establish a connection with customers—all types of consumers possibly. Regarding the numbers that count for the LGBTQ+ responders, the replies appear almost balanced and therefore seem to reflect the complex relationship. As earlier noted regarding the Pink Pound, the group appears ambiguously dealing with these messages.

4.1. The case of McDonalds

- 17 As can be highlighted in the following post by McDonald's, replies to diversity posts / references to LGBTQ+ support can create ambivalent reactions. The following post was published related to the *Pride Parade* in Cologne. Criticism towards it becomes apparent in almost derogatory comments, investigating the statements closer. Stepping up for a cause like the support of LGBTQ+ as McDonalds attempts here could perhaps lead to negative responses of potential customers or individuals, even achieving the contrary of the message intended.

Figure 5. – Instagram post¹² by McDonalds.

- 18 The starting point of the statements might appear relatively harmless. It is the simplified depiction of a traditional French Fries holder on a staircase; the recipient can see a rainbow streaming out of it. The German heading reads “Vielfalt gewinnt – nicht nur beim CSD in Köln” (working translation: “Diversity wins – not only at the CSD in Cologne”). The idea behind such advertising should obviously show the company’s standing on diversity. Apart from the picture, selected comments are subsequently given, and by that the reader can get an impression of how potential customers/ individuals react to it.

@mcdonaldsde: Vielfalt gewinnt – nicht nur beim CSD in Köln #ichliebees
 @maltehannoverphotography: Wie alle wegen 6 Farben hier ausrasten 😊 meine Fresse 🤔
 @_gian.rbs: Muss eben zum augenarzt
 @_.adrii_jhu.: @x_fynn_217
 @_flammenrose
 @r.obin.tn: Gut das es aufm Boden is kann man drauf treten @its_artur02
 @r.obin.tn: @its_artur02: 🤔🤔
 @yusa_kaya01: @r.obin.hamburg: so und nicht anders
 @r.obin.tn:
 @trcslyxx: deswegen find ich burger king besser...
 @ozzodbekh:
 @trcslyxx: nein
 @x_unknown.simp_x: Traurig dass wenn man sich hier Gefühlt die kommentare anschaut wie die meisten hier homophob sind. Ganz ehrlich es nervt einf nur. Ihr straights/heteros wollt dass ihr akzeptiert werdet aber dann akzeptieren die meisten uns nicht? Ganz ehrlich... Ne. Wenn ihr uns nicht akzeptiert dann akzeptieren wir euch auch nicht. Gleichberechtigung. Ich finde es leider schade dass es die meisten Menschen nicht kapieren dass das normal is. Und dann noch meckern dass es keinen Straight Month gibt... Es gibt doch 11 straight months außer halt 1. Ganz ehrlich seit froh dass ihr wenigstens mehr habt als wir. Ganz ehrlich diese ganzen homophoben idioten machen mich agressiv.
 @ehrenbruderchini: Ich gehe rechts wie die nette dame auf dem bild
 @ehrenbruderchini: Ab zu bürgerking

@max29holl: Marketing durchgespielt
 @davidrocki13: So viel bunte Farben
 @tolapoli_ahmed: LGBTQ+ 🏳️🌈
 @iamjustinskrzypiec: Schmutz
 @diamond.j.berg:
 @einsmichael: Korrekt das die Person extra links läuft
 @hookah_rene: Promotion Action
 @enes.spr: Ab heute gehe ich zu @burgerkingde
 @deniss133_7: Gaydonals
 @tm_o63: Ich geh jetzt nie wieder zu euch
 [...]

- 19 Some of the posts might surprise though they are not unexpected. As can be seen from the comments, there are two dimensions to the display of the rainbow flag here: on the one hand, a lot of negative comments are generated because of the display itself and on the other hand, as some users state that they will now be frequenting *Burger King* instead, oblivious to the thought that the other company might also create pride related marketing content. Seemingly the competitor of McDonald's is named as a reference. In the middle of the comments, a section is found to comment on the matter more extensively (compare post by x_unknown.simp_x). Here the focus is concerned with homophobia in general, pointing out on the larger scale in the comment before and after, "[...] There are already 11 straight months except of 1[...]"¹³ (working translation) (x_unknown.simp_x).
- 20 However, only one comment mentions the term *marketing* itself, stating, "*Marketing durchgespielt*". The statement de-classifies the post by McDonalds as simply marketing. Nevertheless, it is challenging to disregard McDonald's efforts easily as pure marketing. However, apart from its own statements about supporting the LGBTQ+ community, the company has set controversial signs. On the one hand, "[...] the chain was spending 4% of its national advertising budget on Black-, Hispanic-, Asian Pacific American-, women- and LGBTQ-owned platforms, a number it says it will increase to 10% by 2024 [...]" (Hiken, 2021) in support but was also criticised for "controversies alleging discrimination" (ibid.) and support for Anti-Trans Legislation (Hall, 2021). This reflects a rather ambivalent approach. The company—in its own words—is starting to show responsibility in Germany as well as in the US, but the line between rainbow-washing and rainbow marketing remains thin.¹⁴

4.2. The case of #rainbowwashing

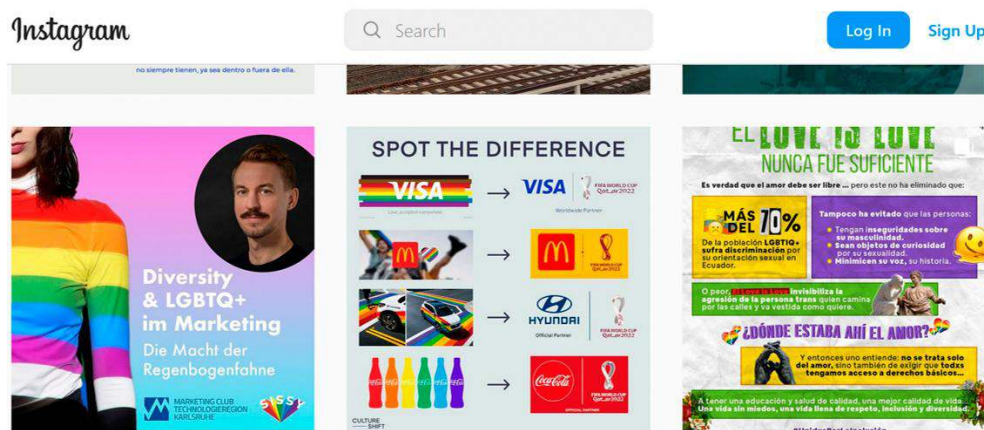
- 21 The following example from Instagram called #rainbowwashing should serve as a source for another sample regarding rainbow-washing. It illustrates how different the examples appear and how they are perceived by various (predominantly queer / LGBTQ+) audiences or recipients, as the following quote from an Instagram post of #rainbowwashing illustrates. The statement points out very well how its author, zerowastepath (an alias typical for Instagram), perceives commercial interest in connection with pride and how critically and seriously they acknowledge the double standard.

zerowastepath
 PRIDE WAS A RIOT 🏳️🌈

—

A reminder that as corporations bring out their rainbow merchandise that Pride

Figure 7. – #rainbowwashing account (2023).



- 24 Under the heading “Spot the Difference”, one can see brands such as VISA, McDonalds, Hundai or Coca-Cola. While on the left side of the picture, the marketing for Pride Month (June 2022) is demonstrated, the right side shows the advertising concept for the football championship in Qatar only later in November to December 2022 (compare #rainbowwashing account and Sweney, 2022). Interestingly, McDonalds is again part of the group of ambivalently acting brands/companies, and by that proves controversial approaches as discussed under 4.1. Besides, especially in the case of football, difficulties regarding the potential support for LGBTQ+ agendas are depending on the country of origin, as could be observed in with the World Football Championship in Qatar.

Figure 8. – Brands sponsoring the Fifa World Cup in Qatar this year have previously used the colours of the Pride rainbow flag in their logos to show support for LGBT+ rights.



Photograph: Culture Shift (Sweney, 2022).

4.3. The case of the American Embassy

- 25 Rainbow-washing is not only a phenomenon regarding companies. It can also happen in public communication of states or countries. In this example, the American Embassy in Kuwait posted the following tweet¹⁷ on Twitter in June 2022. In closer observation, the

cultural controversy becomes obvious. It almost appears as part of a critical view as the post depicts the more inclusive LGBTQ+ rainbow flag that points out standing up for the rights of the LGBTQ+ community. However, there appears text added that reads, “All human beings should be treated with respect [...]”. Though this text shows a clear statement, it still appears slightly concerning, as it can be interpreted in two directions. Using “should” reflects a wish or hope and a careful approach towards this topic. Besides, “should” also implies that perhaps not everyone thinks that way.

Figure 9. – Tweet of the US Embassy Kuwait (2022) on Twitter.



- 26 So, depending on the background of the recipients—as common in foreign relations—, they might reflect different opinions towards the topic of diversity and inclusion. In the case of embassies, there are perhaps different matters included. Nevertheless, the double standard partly becomes obvious. However, in a more general perspective, a tweet might appear different in range compared to a flag on a building which remains a different kind of statement (compare Forbes article by Solender (2021) on new legislation regarding flying flags other than the American one on embassy buildings) as it not only represents the opinion of an entity with regard to the private sector and financial markets but moreover of a state institution. By an embassy building the entire state and its people is represented without preferring one group over another. Making statements of the discussed kind necessarily tends to become complicated.

4.4. Pride and/or money?

- 27 Shifting the focus of the analysis back to companies and corporate communication, it can be observed that although being criticised still, companies refrain from taking down pride-related images in product marketing. In many cases, the opposite happens as can be observed with the companies named below like *FedEx* or *UBS*. Many of them,

use or even advocate diversity extensively but still donate to the opposite cause. Despite the criticism, many companies leave pride statements on display for commercialism, ignore critical comments and/or do not investigate further when supporting politicians. How far marketing and creative directors are aware of the actual circumstance of Pride remains questionable (Barker, 2022). Presumably, some might count themselves as queer or LGBTQ+ but do not seem to intervene. In their Forbes article, Ennis Dawn (2019) provides the following list of Companies and their donations to anti-gay politicians. The companies' names are well-known for displaying rainbow colours and pride on their websites and business communication sites in June but seem to forget in the remaining months.

Those nine corporations with perfect index scores which made donations to anti-gay politicians from 2017 to 2018, are, in order from most to least:

1. AT&T donated \$2,755,000 to 193 anti-gay politicians.
2. UPS donated \$2,366,122 to 159 anti-gay politicians.
3. Comcast donated \$2,116,500 to 154 anti-gay politicians.
4. Home Depot donated \$1,825,500 to 111 anti-gay politicians.
5. General Electric donated \$1,380,500 to 97 anti-gay politicians.
6. FedEx donated \$1,261,500 to 75 anti-gay politicians.
7. UBS donated \$1,094,750 to 72 anti-gay politicians.
8. Verizon donated \$1,022,803 to 74 anti-gay politicians.
9. Pfizer donated \$959,263 to 52 anti-gay politicians. [...] (Dawn, 2019)

- 28 Regarding those numbers in donations, there appears to be a less genuine interest in the LGBTQ+ agenda in contrast to commercial ambitions. This impression partially proves “the marketing and profit only” approach. Bandera (2022) points out that “[t]he most salient among these companies are Toyota, AT&T, Amazon and Comcast, who altogether have donated over \$1.1 million to candidates with anti-LGBTQ+ agendas”. Nevertheless, customers can progressively decide whether to buy from these companies by looking at those numbers. Rejection or even boycott—in both ways (see Kontio, 2019)—can quickly be initiated when potential customers perceive the message that companies do not necessarily change their approach (Baruchin, 2022). Through the influence of social media, even purely commercial interests can be altered too. As a result, it becomes much more difficult for companies to explain their approach to not taking a stand.

4.5. Rainbow-washing or queerbaiting: the case of the non-binary T-shirt

- 29 Another example that adds to *rainbow-washing* can be seen in *queerbaiting* (Murphy, 2023 on queerbaiting). It often goes hand in hand with rainbow-washing and implies a commitment that must be seen as faked. In the case of a non-binary T-shirt (Figure 10), the absurdity is illustrated. The following ad for T-shirts is included in the analysis to demonstrate how companies try to exploit the “Pride” aspect.

Figure 10. – Non-binary T-shirts (by Etsy) in female and male form (Twitter post¹⁸ March 2022).



- 30 Here it becomes apparent that the marketing approach is fundamentally unaware of the dimensions of their product. Who would advertise a T-shirt that advocates non-binary identity in a binary way? A male and a female version do basically not make sense. On the contrary, non-binary express to not feel related to either or even defined as exclusively male or female (Sauer, 2018). Non-binary means the opposite and approaches genders in a more fluid way. The advertising expresses less sensitive marketing and tries to sell the product for commercial reasons only.

4.6. The case of Converse/Vans

- 31 An interesting approach can be seen in the sample below, Figure 11. The picture, at first glance, appears very much like rainbow-washing, even queer-washing, as the display of the flag is undiscussable and straight forward.

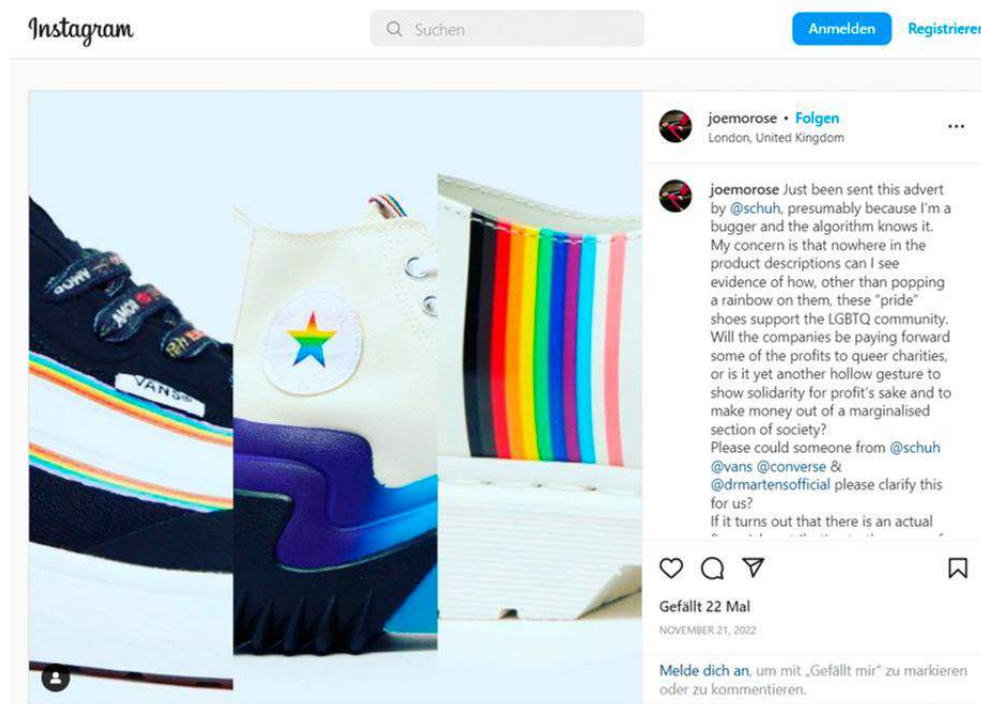
@joemorose: Just been sent this advert by @schuh, presumably because I'm a bugger and the algorithm knows it. My concern is that nowhere in the product descriptions can I see evidence of how, other than popping a rainbow on them, these "pride" shoes support the LGBTQ community. Will the companies be paying forward some of the profits to queer charities, or is it yet another hollow gesture to show solidarity for profit's sake and to make money out of a marginalised section of society? Please could someone from @schuh @vans @converse & @drmartensofficial please clarify this for us? If it turns out that there is an actual financial contribution to the cause of pride, I will happily purchase a pair of each. Many thanks. Concerned, London.

#pride #lgbt #lgbtq #schuh #vans #converse #drmartens #rainbowwashing #queer #gay¹⁹

- 32 Is this also reflected by the user comment as some concern is expressed on the inclination of the brands depicted in the post. The authors comment to possibly purchase the shoes if support was genuine—implicitly posing the question: Rainbow-

washing or rainbow-marketing? Following Verhoeven (2022), Converse has donated a large sum of money, about \$1.3 million, in support of LGBTQ+ courses. So here, an answer to the post can be given as yes, it is rainbow-marketing. There is a genuine inclination. Nevertheless, the sum as such could be criticised. The post also shows a typical procedure on social media. In asking for validation and further investigation, it puts the customer in the position to become more active and perhaps—if following the request towards LGBTQ+ marketing—more aware regarding the company's strategic behaviour.

Figure 11. – Converse/Vans post (2022).



4.7. The case of Uber

- 33 Another sample from the company Uber should now be in focus. The post implies that Uber has become more aware of trans- and non-binary people and their communicative needs among their customers. The recipients can find two posts in the post, an initial post and an update.

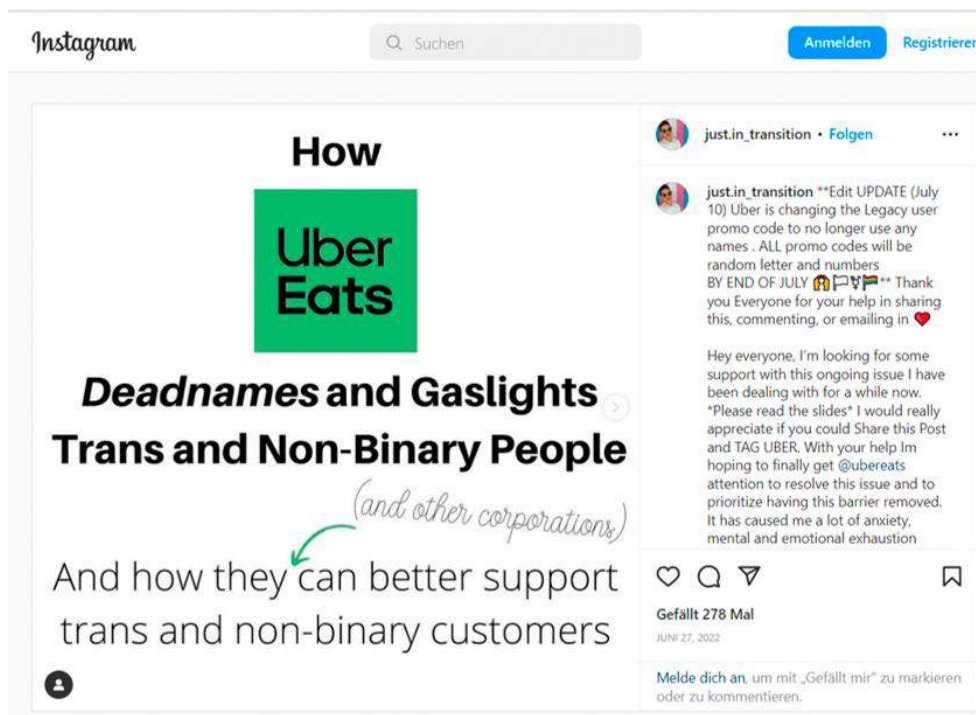
@just.in_transition: **Edit UPDATE (July 10) Uber is changing the Legacy user promo code to no longer use any names. ALL promo codes will be random letter and numbers BY END OF JULY 🏳️ ** Thank you Everyone for your help in sharing this, commenting, or emailing in ❤️

Hey everyone, I'm looking for some support with this ongoing issue I have been dealing with for a while now. *Please read the slides* I would really appreciate if you could Share this Post and TAG UBER. With your help Im hoping to finally get @ubereats attention to resolve this issue and to prioritise having this barrier removed. It has caused me a lot of anxiety, mental and emotional exhaustion trying repeatedly to reach out to them with no avail. This isn't just for me. This is a Barrier to trans and non binary people. Please share in story or Post, also helpful to tag and comment @ubereats.

@ubereats @uber#transrights #trans #transgender #transman #transwoman #transmasc #nonbinary #queer #pronouns #humanrights #lgbtq #pridemonth #torontopride #transally #lgbtqally #torontolgbt #transrightsarehumanrights #lgbtqtoronto #uberpride #rainbowwashing #genderidentity #genderexpression #transwellness #ubereats #ubereatspromo #ubereatspromocode #uberdobetter #dobetteruber #nomorerrainbowwashing²⁰ (Uber Eats Post, 2022)

- 34 As the post indicates, some customers have objected to the practice of dealing with names and pronouns. As pointed out by a user, the policy on pronouns and referring to gender has caused them anxiety. On the Uber Website the company displays current issues they are working on. One of them, the use of names among non-binary and trans drivers relates to the post above “[o]ur updated display name settings make it easier to support transgender and nonbinary drivers and delivery people who would like to display their chosen or affirmed name in the app [...]” (see Uber on Pride²¹). The updated post functions as a reply to the perceived issue as having been solved (see Uber on Diversity²²).

Figure 12. – Uber Eats post (2022).



4.8. The case of IKEA

- 35 With its post regarding the *International Day against Homophobia or Transphobia*, IKEA supports the LGBTQ+ agenda. With a look at their catalogues, already in the times before social media, IKEA appeared already quite progressive in offering diverse gender perspectives in contrast to other companies' catalogues—as it portrayed female and male people in situations without attributing stereotypical roles, like females preparing food in the kitchen and boys using tools to repair a device, to them (Dumetz, Zanolini & Morgan, 2020).

Figure 13. – IKEA post²³ Twitter (2019).Figure 14. – IKEA catalogue²⁴ (2016).

- 36 The post above can be seen as a significant example of diversity, successful rainbow marketing / LGBTQ+ sensitive marketing, also adding the hashtag #beyourself. Apart

from effectful pictures IKEA also shows inclination, according to Kontio (2019), as the company donates “one fourth of the cost” of its famous blue/rainbow-coloured bags in Germany to associations like “Queer Education”²⁵ and the “Youth Organisation Network Llambda”²⁶. Although there still seems to be room for improvement, this case illustrates an example of a company being aware of their social responsibility and role in meaningful support of diverse groups in society and therefore counteracting rainbow-washing.

4.9. The case of UPS

- 37 In the case of UPS, the approach seems to have changed profoundly regarding its current state, as the website indicates. UPS appear to show much awareness in advocating and inviting customers and employees to be open and acceptant. As the screenshot from the website below shows, UPS progressively invites customers and employees to celebrate pride with them.

Figure 15. – Website UPS²⁷ on Pride.



- 38 Across all profiles, the company’s message regarding pride month can be observed. The following quote to support this perception can be found on the website of UPS France²⁸ (2022):

De quoi s’agit-il ? Le mois des Fiertés est arrivé : en tant que membre ou allié, il existe de nombreuses façons de s’impliquer pour représenter la communauté LGBTQ+.

Pourquoi cela est important ? « Le mois des Fiertés est un moment important pour reconnaître nos employés LGBTQ+ à travers le monde qui forment une part significative du réseau mondial UPS », a déclaré Laura Lane, directrice des affaires générales d’UPS et sponsor exécutive du Pride Alliance Business Resource Group.

- 39 The question at the beginning of the quote asks for the importance of Pride Month. The subsequent answer shows precisely the inclination by addressing the customers and displaying the symbols of Pride, and reflecting on the employees of UPS themselves. In the frame of this research article, the company UPS seems to be one to support and practice sensitivity towards notions of the LGBTQ+ agendas in and through their company culture, embracing diversity on a larger scale as the company invests through its foundation “with a new commitment of more than \$11.5 million in grants to support organizations focused on empowerment, education and leadership [...] funding for the

Human Rights Campaign Foundation's Workplace Project, a nationally recognized source of expert information on LGBTQ issues [...]" (MarketScreener, 2019).

5. Discussion: between rainbow-washing and genuine allyship

- 40 After analysing the different samples of this preliminary study on the background of the question: "*True Colours or Rainbow-Washing Exposed!? – Company Pride in and through Digital and Social Media Reviewed*", the results need to be discussed to conclude them further. The various samples of the analysis have been portrayed under 4.1 to 4.9. Generally, there seems to be a lot more focus on the opinion and buying behaviour of potential customers as responsibility for transparency is creasing. Customers need to inform themselves before they take the decision to spend money on particular products. Once customers take a more thoughtful decision in purchasing products, companies might reflect on their inclination towards particular agendas connected to using specific marketing features like the rainbow flag. This approach can put a certain pressure on the companies to communicate and connect with customers more responsibly and possibly trying harder to meet their expectations.
- 41 Furthermore, leading staff, marketing and creative directors need to contemplate reviewing companies' structure on diversity measures (also see Weinwurm-Wilhelm, 2021) and inclusion as they are genuinely interested in marketing in particular for customer growth in specific target groups. Lately, many web pages—economic and business-related- and journalists—review the product placing entries of companies very closely and name companies that use rainbow-washing as a marketing concept by their name. However, despite the detailed and very close review and, as pointed out before, the relationship between Pride and Money remains complex as supportive and commercial interests might still collide in individual cases.
- 42 Nevertheless, there are good examples among the companies (IKEA and UBER) that embrace diverse tendencies (Weinwurm-Wilhelm, 2021) and companies that have changed their agenda after severe criticism (UPS). With potential customers being critical about marketing or severe support for the LGBTQ+ cause, adverse effects on the image of a particular product or brand must be a concern for companies. Kontio (2019) illustrates that by the example of the company Diesel which has lost followers on Twitter due to taking a stand regarding its LGBTQ+ advertising content:
- The iconic company Diesel, meanwhile, shows attitude and celebrates massive losses. Via social media, the brand thanks the defectors and writes: "For over 40 years, we have been proud of our convictions, and we believe in #pride. For those who don't believe, including the 14,000 followers who have left us in the past week... bye bye! To all who share our values and beliefs, let's celebrate that love is love #loveislove. Always."²⁹ (Working translation)
- 43 Advocating diversity remains a complex matter for companies. Therefore, some companies might preferably not take a stand than falsely display badges they did not earn. (Niculescu, 2022)

6. Limitation and conclusion

- 44 Due to the narrow frame as a preliminary study, the paper can only investigate some more prominent examples. The selection has been random and must be more parameter-guided for a more extensive study. As the focus has been on social networks and other digital media, another limitation must be seen in the constantly changing content, such as Instagram posts and the ambiguous communication format in this field. A more exclusive selection would adapt better to the challenges and objections regarding linguistic in-depth analysis.
- 45 Concluding it can be stated that rainbow-washing is a complex subject that needs scientific attention and offers a broad field for further research regarding business and company communication—internally and externally. Companies quickly dive into marketing campaigns for various reasons focusing on the commercial side only. However, when they start displaying symbols like that of the LGBTQ+ community, then genuine inclination must be given to keep the credibility. As pointed out before, the rainbow flag constitutes a political symbol. It reflects that openness and sensitivity regarding diversity are essential to environments where they plan to display it on the product. Potential customers might want to see more in the product's origin than commercially driven interest, mainly when they belong to the LGBTQ+.
- 46 Nevertheless, the critical part is reflected in companies' detecting measures and patterns and developing a critical sense for analysis. Especially on the level of language sensitivity, much more awareness must be devoted to companies and their broader communication style. Repeatedly, the question must be posed if companies understand the importance and take the matter seriously or if "Pride" is merely another marketing option.

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NOTES

1. Meaning Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer and Plus (= multifaceted identities in the *spectre*).
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setzen mit regenbogenfarbener Bandenwerbung in den Stadien ihre Signale gegen Homophobie, Rassismus und Intoleranz. Kurzum: Unternehmen positionierten sich als Gestalter einer vorurteilsfreien und diversen Gesellschaft.”

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29. “Das Kult-Unternehmen Diesel indes zeigt Haltung und feiert die massenhaften Verluste. Via Social-Media bedankt sich die Brand bei den Abtrünnigen und schreibt: „Seit über 40 Jahren sind wir stolz auf unsere Überzeugungen und wir glauben an #pride. Für diejenigen, die nicht daran glauben, inklusive der 14.000 Follower, die uns in der vergangenen Woche verlassen haben... bye bye! An alle, die unsere Werte und Überzeugungen teilen, lasst uns feiern, dass Liebe Liebe ist #loveislove. Immer.”

ABSTRACTS

Following a noble cause can function as a basis for valuable marketing. Apart from the fact that selling products also belongs to this scheme, companies must individualise and re-create these products constantly. In this process, many companies seek great motivation in using the rainbow flag or the rainbow colours, especially around June—traditionally celebrated as Pride month—to promote and sell their products to customers who (like to) identify with these goods. However, lately, companies are also questioned about their genuine inclination toward causes connected to these colours as customers desire to know how far the product reflects the general support of the LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer and beyond) community. This paper analyses therefore a selected number of random samples in a preliminary study using hashtags by companies as well as individuals on Instagram and written statements from companies' social media accounts and websites as a basis. Through their approach, the author aims to show how rainbow-washing is detected, communicated and criticised as customers become more aware of the difference between potential marketing traps and genuine support. As the results of this preliminary study have so far indicated, customers develop more awareness and also communicate positive as well as negative changes in cooperative behaviour. Through this article's limited approach and frame, merely impulses can be given to research the topic within a broader corpus linguistic frame.

Se mettre au service d'une cause noble peut servir de base à un marketing de qualité. Outre le fait que la vente de produits fasse partie de ce processus, les entreprises doivent individualiser et recréer ces produits en permanence. Ainsi, de nombreuses entreprises sont amenées à utiliser le drapeau ou les couleurs de l'arc-en-ciel, en particulier autour du mois de juin — traditionnellement célébré comme le mois des fiertés — pour promouvoir et vendre leurs produits aux clients qui aiment s'identifier à ce type de marchandises. Toutefois, ces derniers temps, les entreprises sont également interrogées sur leur véritable engagement envers les causes liées à ces couleurs, car les clients souhaitent savoir dans quelle mesure le produit reflète le soutien général à la communauté LGBTQI+ (lesbiennes, gays, bisexuels, trans, queer et autres). Cet article analyse donc un certain nombre d'échantillons aléatoires dans le cadre d'une étude préliminaire en se basant sur des hashtags utilisés par des entreprises ou des individus sur Instagram ou d'autres médias en ligne. À travers son approche, l'auteure vise à montrer comment le *rainbow-washing* est détecté, communiqué et critiqué à mesure que les clients prennent conscience de la différence entre les possibles pièges marketing et un engagement sincère. Comme l'indiquent les résultats de cette étude préliminaire, les clients sont de plus en plus conscients de la chose et communiquent également sur les changements positifs et négatifs dans leur comportement. L'approche et le cadre limités de cet article permettent néanmoins d'esquisser des pistes de recherche pour l'étude de ce sujet dans le cadre d'un corpus linguistique plus large.

INDEX

Mots-clés: lavage arc-en-ciel, marketing LGBTQ+, marketing des médias sociaux, communication d'entreprise de la diversité, culture d'entreprise inclusive

Keywords: rainbow-washing, LGBTQ+ sensitive marketing, social media marketing, diversity business communication, inclusive corporate culture

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