Courting the Queer Consumer: Authenticity and Accountability in Purpose Driven Marketing

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Short Abstract: This paper examines the phenomenon of LGBTQ+ directed purpose-driven marketing, scrutinising its impact, authenticity, and intersectionality through TikTok data. It highlights consumer activism, boycotts, and the challenges of commodification while advocating for inclusive and ethical marketing strategies respecting diverse identities and global movements.
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Purpose driven marketing has been an increasingly visible strategy to engage with Millenial and Gen Z consumers by attaching brands to a social cause or mission (LaBar 2-23; Vredenburg et al. 2020). This has perhaps been seen most prominently in the amplification of the LGBTQ+ community through social media campaigns, tailored advertising, and targeted product ranges (Hensley et al. 2019; Champlin & Li 2020). However, as consumers become more discerning and aware of marketing tactics, there is a growing concern regarding the authenticity and impact of purpose-driven marketing on the LGBTQ+ community (Zheng 2021) particularly where this intersects with other issues such as climate change or racial justice (Vrendenburg et al. 2020), and where previously courted queer consumers may feel exploited for their purchasing power rather than valued for their identities and experiences (Coombes & Singh 2022).

This paper examines the intended audience of commercial LGBTQ+ orientated purpose-driven marketing, and compares this to the increasingly intersectional experience of the queer consumer, reflecting on the dichotomy of queer marketing stereotypes against an increasingly radicalised queer consumer. By examining the concept of the "happy queer"(Bengry 2015; Coffin et al. 2019; Kates 1999) or the "respectable queer" archetype (Joshi 2011) often courted by LGBTQ+ purpose-driven marketing campaigns, this paper will consider the ways in which the extensive history of marketing to this mythologised gay archetype (Fejes 2022; Ginder & Byun 2015) has served to deradicalise and homogenise the queer community in direct service of homocapitalism (Rao 2015) and homonation (Puar 2007).
Through the medium of a brand case study, this paper will then demonstrate how the reclamation of queer as a political ideology and a call for authentic representation has challenged LGBTQ+ purpose-driven marketing strategies, particularly through the lens of intersectionality and community backlash. This includes acts of consumer boycott and rejections of pinkwashing from grassroots organisations (Dabbous 2023), boycott mobilisation and education from queer content creators of colour (Jacob 2023; Hunter 2023), elevating queer solidarity in climate change discourse (Feng 2022; WWF 2023), and the dichotomy of ostensible LGBTQ+ support in the wider context of intersectionality identified injustices (Verma 2021).

The impact of these responses to purpose-driven marketing to the LGBTQ+ community is evaluated, focusing on the potential for empowerment, community building, and the advancement of LGBTQ+ rights, as well as the risks of tokenization, commodification, and reinforcing existing stereotypes.

**Data collection**

We situate our study on the social media platform TikTok. The number of Tiktok users has grown from less than 500,000 in 2020 to 834.3million in 2023 (Oberlo, 2023). Tiktok, as a platform, encourages replication to “harness waves of cascading social connection that Papacharissi (2015a) terms “affective publics.” (Hautea et al, 2021, p1) Duguay (2023) argues for “TikTok’s affordances, features, and algorithmic functionalities both facilitate and hamper the expression of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and other diverse (LGBTQ+) identities and the formation of queer publics”, adding “The queer potential to realize utopic futures, ones unconstrained by heteronormativity and
cisnormativity, can be realized in moments—as short as a looping video—when “the here and now is transcended by a *then* and a *there* that could and indeed should be” (page 1).

On TikTok, hashtags are used to identify content which fits within a particular topic, and acts as a way of organizing the activity which takes place on the platform (Hermann, 2019). These hashtags enable networked social action and consumer activism on the platform through the sharing of short form video content, opinion pieces, humorous user generated content and other forms of multimedia.

Our study will analyse data gathered from the TikTok platform around brand activism related hashtags. From an initial search of the TikTok platform, it appears that several of the biggest global brands experience mass boycotting including McDonald's, Disney, Starbucks and Coca-Cola. These boycotts are often in response to brand involvement in the Israel/Palestine conflict or global issues around climate change and social justice.

Specifically our research will focus on consumer activism against Coca Cola and its subsidiary brands. As a brand, Coca Cola is a visible supporter of the LGBTQ+ community
This is reflected in the positive sentiment around of user generated content shared using hashtags in support of the Cola Cola brand including #gaycola, #cocacolalgbt #lgbtcola and #costalovespride

(Source: Coca Cola.com, 2024)
In 2023 Costa Coffee, owned by Coca Cola, experienced backlash and was boycotted by anti-LGBTQ+ groups for featuring an illustration of a trans man with top surgery scars in their marketing materials. The LGBTQ+ community actively praised Costa for including this illustration and supported the brand using the hashtags detailed above.

However, in late 2023 onwards there has been a movement towards active boycott of the brand on TikTok due to the perceived involvement of the CocaCola brand in areas of political conflict. There has been growth in hashtags encouraging consumer boycott against the brand including
#BoycottCoke
#BoycottCocaCola
The authors frame this backlash as an active example of queer failure (Pirani & Daskalopoulou 2022), most notably the in the ideas of productive disobedience (Bode & Ostergaard 2013), and the concept of failure as value destroying (Kjeldgaard et al. 2021). The centring of queer failure as a critical response to LGBTQ+ focused purpose-driven marketing, and with it the recognition of politics and identities beyond the queer, invites the opportunity to eschew the commodification of the LGBTQ+ community and instead foster genuine inclusivity, empowerment, and social change as a reaction to systemic failures (Clare 2019).

Our initial findings note that the race and class intersections of the LGBTQ+ community appear regularly in TikTok content encouraging consumer boycott. However, our research identifies discourse that white, liberal, cisgender LGBs have/will break the boycott for personal convenience (mostly around Starbucks and Disney) because they are "white first". The discourse illuminates the perceived deradicalised queerness of the “respectable queer” consumer, and highlights tensions inherent in homocapitalist and homonationalist discourse.
This paper argues that while purpose-driven marketing has played a significant role in amplifying the LGBTQ+ community and promoting inclusivity, there is a need for further critical examination and ethical consideration to ensure that marketing strategies authentically represent and benefit the LGBTQ+ community, but that these must fit into part of a wider matrix of authentic actions that respects intersecting identities and consumer responses to global movements.
References


