

Behind the Backlash Against Bud Light

After Dylan Mulvaney, the transgender influencer, promoted the beer on Instagram, conservatives called for a boycott. The fallout has grown to include the retailer Target and the country singer Garth Brooks.



By Amanda Holpuch

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Three months after Bud Light was featured in a social media promotion by a transgender influencer, Dylan Mulvaney, the beer company is still dealing with the strong response to its campaign.

Bud Light has faced a boycott from some conservative commentators and celebrities as its sales have plummeted and two of its marketing executives have gone on leave. It was also criticized by some in the L.G.B.T.Q. community for its tepid response to the backlash.

The criticism of Bud Light, amid other complaints about brand partnerships with transgender people, comes as Republican state lawmakers are proposing legislation that seeks to regulate the lives of young transgender people, restrict drag shows in a way that could include performances by transgender people and require schools to out transgender students to their parents.

Bud Light has become an unexpected symbol in these efforts.



Dylan Mulvaney began documenting her gender transition in the “Days of Girlhood” series on TikTok just over a year ago.

Rob Kim/Getty Images

How did this begin?

The controversy began on April 1, when Ms. Mulvaney posted a video on her Instagram account, where she has 1.8 million followers, to promote a Bud Light contest.

Ms. Mulvaney, 26, is popular on TikTok, where she has more than 10.8 million followers and has been documenting her transition online. She celebrated a full year of her “Days of Girlhood” series in March with a live show at Rockefeller Center called “Dylan Mulvaney’s Day 365 Live!”

Her Bud Light promotional post was less than a minute long and was mostly about a \$15,000 giveaway that the company sponsored during March Madness. She mentions that the company sent her a tallboy can with her face on it to celebrate the 365-day milestone.

Calls for a boycott followed. Some of the most prominent voices backing it have attacked the transgender community in the past, including the musician Kid Rock, who posted a video of himself shooting a stack of Bud Light cases in April.

After Bud Light’s sales slumped, Anheuser-Busch, the beer’s brewer, announced in late April that two of its executives were taking a leave of absence. The company also said in early May that it would focus its marketing campaigns on sports and music.

What has happened since?

In May, Target, the retail company, joined Bud Light in shifting its marketing because of

opposition to its inclusion of L.G.B.T.Q. communities. For more than 10 years, the retailer has created displays and merchandise for Pride Month, the annual celebration for L.G.B.T.Q. Americans in June, but it moved its Pride displays in some stores after the backlash.

In June, Garth Brooks was criticized when he said that his new bar in Nashville would serve many types of beer, including Bud Light. He said that people who were upset by that could go to other bars in the area.

He later acknowledged that his remarks had caused “a little bit of a stir” during his livestream show, “Inside Studio G.”

“Everybody’s got their opinions. But inclusiveness is always going to be me,” Mr. Brooks said. “I think diversity is the answer to the problems that are here and the answer to the problems that are coming. So I love diversity. All inclusive, so all are welcome. I understand that might not be other people’s opinions, but that’s OK, man.”

Ms. Mulvaney says she has been a victim of bullying and transphobia.

Ms. Mulvaney has become more popular in the year since she created “Days of Girlhood.” In October, she spoke with President Biden at the White House about transgender rights.

But that success led to personal attacks from public figures, including Senator Marsha Blackburn, Republican of Tennessee, and Caitlyn Jenner, the Republican transgender woman and former Olympian whose politics have made her a target of criticism from members of the L.G.B.T.Q. community.

Ms. Mulvaney addressed the Bud Light controversy on TikTok on June 29, saying that she had faced stalking and personal attacks in the months since her Instagram video was posted.

“What transpired from that video was more bullying and transphobia than I could have ever imagined,” she said. “I’ve been followed, and I have felt a loneliness that I wouldn’t wish on anyone.”

Bud Light, she said, had not reached out to her. “For a company to hire a trans person and then not publicly stand by them is worse, in my opinion, than not hiring a trans person at all,” she said.



Boycotts bring mixed results.

Anna Tuchman, an associate professor of marketing at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, has researched boycotts, including the calls for people to stop buying Goya Foods products in 2020 after the company's president praised President Donald J. Trump. Her research and other similar studies have found that such efforts tend to be short-lived and don't have a long-term effect.

Professor Tuchman said that, while people may be willing to change their behavior for a few weeks, it is much harder to convince people to change their long-term behavior.

Another obstacle in boycotts is finding replacement products.

Anheuser-Busch sells more than 100 brands of beer in the United States and is the largest beer brewer in the world.

One supporter of the boycott, Representative Dan Crenshaw, Republican of Texas, posted a video online to show that his fridge did not have Bud Light, but it did have beer from Karbach Brewing Company, which is also owned by Anheuser-Busch.



Anheuser-Busch, which makes Bud Light, sells more than 100 brands of beer in the United States and is the largest beer brewer in the world. Jackie Molloy for The New York Times

A “buycott” is when people buy a product to protest a boycott against it. Professor Tuchman found that during the Goya boycott the company’s sales rose by 22 percent over two weeks before falling back to the baseline.

After the country musician Travis Tritt said that he would stop including Bud Light in his tour rider, Kevin John Wasserman, the guitarist for the Offspring who goes by Noodles, said that the band would include Anheuser-Busch products in its rider.

Behind Anheuser-Busch’s abrupt reversal.

Before the boycott, Alissa Heinerscheid, vice president of marketing for Bud Light, said in an interview that the brand needed to be more inclusive.

“The brand is in decline,” Ms. Heinerscheid said on the “Make Yourself at Home” podcast in March. “It’s been in decline for a really long time. And if we do not attract young drinkers to come and drink this brand, there will be no future for Bud Light.”

The company said in late April that Ms. Heinerscheid and Daniel Blake, who oversees marketing for Anheuser-Busch’s mainstream brands, were on leave.

“We have made some adjustments to streamline the structure of our marketing function to reduce layers so that our most senior marketers are more closely connected to every aspect of our brands’ activities,” Anheuser-Busch said in a statement. “These steps will help us maintain focus on the things we do best: brewing great beer for all consumers, while always making a positive impact in our communities and on our country.”

The next week, the company said it would focus marketing efforts on sports and music and would assign senior executives to oversee those campaigns. One executive said during a call with analysts that the product “should not be the focus of the debate.”

L.G.B.T.Q. people in the United States have an estimated \$1.1 trillion in annual purchasing power, according to a 2019 report by LGBT Capital, a financial services company.

Sarah Kate Ellis, the president and chief executive of the L.G.B.T.Q. advocacy organization GLAAD, said in an emailed statement that marketing featuring L.G.B.T.Q. people would continue. “Companies will not end the standard business practice of including diverse people in ads and marketing because a small number of loud, fringe anti-L.G.B.T.Q. activists make noise on social media,” she said.

Ms. Mulvaney, who hadn’t posted on TikTok since the start of the controversy, returned to the platform on April 28 to address her fans and the backlash. “What I’m struggling to understand is the need to dehumanize and to be cruel,” she said. She added that she hopes to return to making people laugh and sharing parts of herself that have nothing to do with her identity, and thanked supporters who may not fully understand or identify with her.

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