

Performative Activism in Marketing

A Senior Thesis Submitted to the Department of Business Administration and
The University Honor Program in Fulfillment of the Requirements for the University and
Departmental Honors Baccalaureate

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December 6, 2024

This Senior Thesis was completed in the Department of Business Administration

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Abstract

This thesis explores performative activism within corporations by researching the history of the term, the motivations behind it, and its impact. This background information is then used to conduct a case study on one of Anheuser-Busch's signature brands: Bud Light. The case study showcases the negative impact a company may face while using performative activism to appeal to a wider audience and reveals that performative activism is dwindling and will most likely continue to do so in the next few years. Further research during these years is important as it will either confirm this thesis's findings, track the downfall of performative activism in its entirety, or even witness the rebirth of this marketing tactic.

Keywords: performative activism, marketing, Bud Light, Anheuser-Busch

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I want to thank Dr. DiRusso. From the original planning to the finishing details, he has always been a great help to me. He was also my academic advisor these last four-and-a-half years, and I would not be here without his continuous support.

I also want to thank Dr. Hutto. I have taken many of her marketing classes during my time here at Millersville University, and the ideas and lessons taught in them helped shape the beginning foundations and ideas of this thesis.

I also thank Dr. Hughes for her assistance, especially during the last push of this thesis. Dr. Hughes' communication and speech class was a big inspiration for this thesis as it gave me insight on how to mix my major and field of study with what I am passionate about.

Finally, thank you to everyone who has helped me with this thesis both directly and indirectly. To Dr. Thyrum for guiding me through the earliest stages and to my friends who have supported me every step of the way, thank you.

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Introduction

In the last decade or so, the expectation of being morally righteous and standing with the oppressed has been pushed to the forefront. People are expected to post black squares to support Black Lives Matter and highlight Instagram stores displaying the popular phrase, “Love Is Love.” More recently, however, this expectation has been pushed onto businesses, and this has led to the social phenomenon known as performative activism-- also known as performative allyship or optical allyship. Performative activism “refers to someone from a nonmarginalized group professing support and solidarity with a marginalized group, but in a way that is not helpful” (Kalina, 2020). This definition can be applied to businesses who are desperate to appeal to a marginalized group of people yet have no true interests or intentions in supporting the cause.

This thesis aims to delve deeper into performative activism by doing a case study on Bud Light and answering the following questions: Is performative activism effective? How do people react to performative activism, and is this reaction expected? Finally, what is the future of performative activism?

Literature Review

History and Statistics

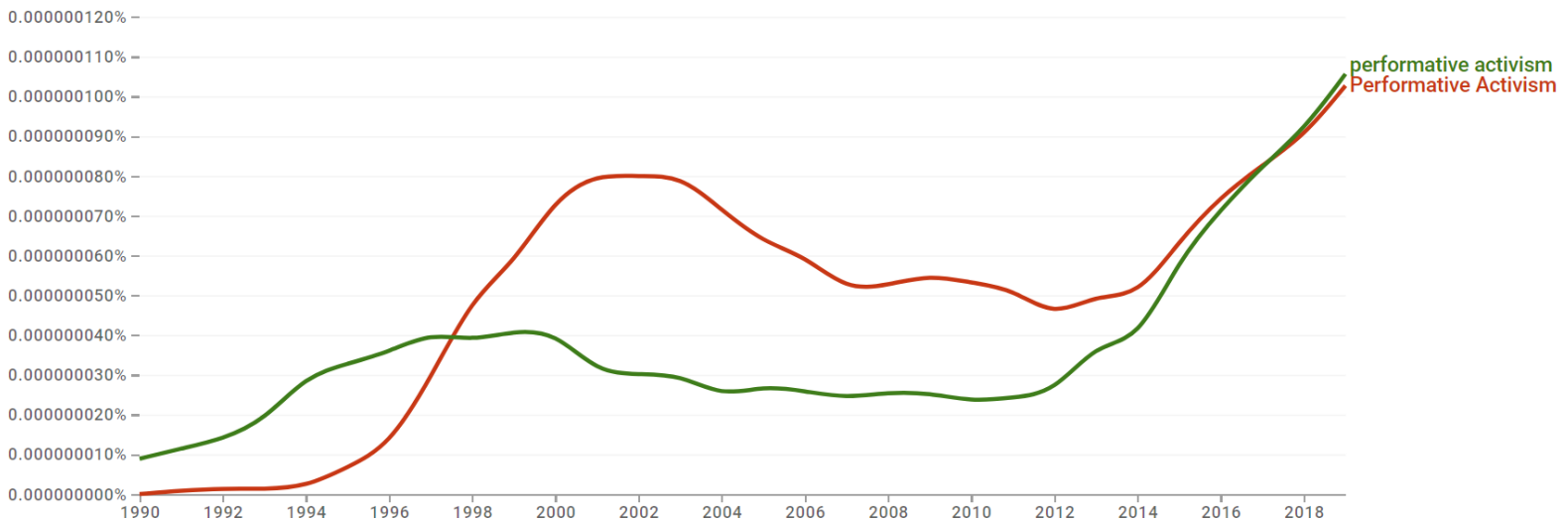
According to Wikipedia, the term “performative activism” can be found in a 2015 article (Performative activism, n.d.). This article, however, was referring to a different type of performative activism that involved performance art (Performative activism, n.d.). Wikipedia also quotes Lou Constant-Desportes, the editor-in-chief of AFROPUNK.com (Performative activism, n.d.). He noted “performative 'activism' dipped in consumerism and 'woke' keywords

used for marketing purpose” (Performative activism, n.d.). Aside from these two instances, Wikipedia’s history section of the term is empty. This shows that performative activism as people know it nowadays is relatively new.

There are other tools, however, that can allow a person to look into the history of words, terms, and phrases. Google Ngram is one such tool. Google Ngram is a search engine within Google that allows users to track phrases in a selection of books over time. Not all books are in the system, but it does cover a vast array of higher-knowledge and scholarly books. The graphs Google Ngram creates are set up with years on the x-axis while the y-axis indicates what percentage of in-system books contain the search term. When searching for “performative activism” in Google Ngram with case-insensitive on, two lines appear on the chart, running from 1990 to 2019 as those are the limits of Google Ngram. One line is for “performative activism,” and the second is for “Performative Activism.” Why these two terms are considered separate and measured independently is unknown. As of October 14, 2024, both terms start off very low in 1990 at 0.0000000051% for “performative activism” and 0% for “Performative Activism” (Google Books Ngram Viewer, n.d.). The line “performative activism” reaches its first peak in 1999 at 0.0000000411% while “Performative Activism” finds its first peak in 2001 at 0.0000000805% (Google Books Ngram Viewer, n.d.). Both lines reach their highest percentages in 2019 at 0.0000001402% (“performative activism”) and 0.0000001334% (“Performative Activism”) (Google Books Ngram Viewer, n.d.).

A second online tool that can be used to find and analyze a term’s history is Google Trends. Google Trends is another search engine within Google, and this one tracks search terms and topics. The tool provides a graph of interest over time with years on the x-axis and interest over time (from 0 to 100) on the y-axis (from 2012 to October 14, 2024). When inputting

“performative activism,” two different options appear. A user can search for “performative activism” as either a term or a topic. It is important to note that in Google Trends, terms and topics are two separate search functions and are analyzed separately thus cannot be compared. As of October 14, 2024, both the term and topic rose and fell over time, and they typically do so at similar times. There are a few cases where this is not the truth, however, such as the stretch between April to June in 2012 (Google Trends, n.d.). The topic search started at 0 in April, growing to 3 in May, and then declining back down to 0 again by June (Google Trends, n.d.). The term search remained at 0 for the entire duration (Google Trends, n.d.). As a term, performative activism reached its highest interest count in June of 2020, maximizing interest at 100 (Google Trends, n.d.). This is the highest peak of interest by a decent-sized margin as the second highest peak was in July 2020 with an interest level of 25 (Google Trends, n.d.). As for the topic search, its peak interest was in April 2021 with an interest of 30 (Google Trends, n.d.). June 2021 with an interest of 27 is the topic’s second-highest interest peak (Google Trends, n.d.). As of October 14, 2024, the term “performative activism” is at an interest level of 5, and the topic “Performative activism” sits at an interest of 6.



Google Books Ngram Viewer

Google Trends Home Explore Trending Now

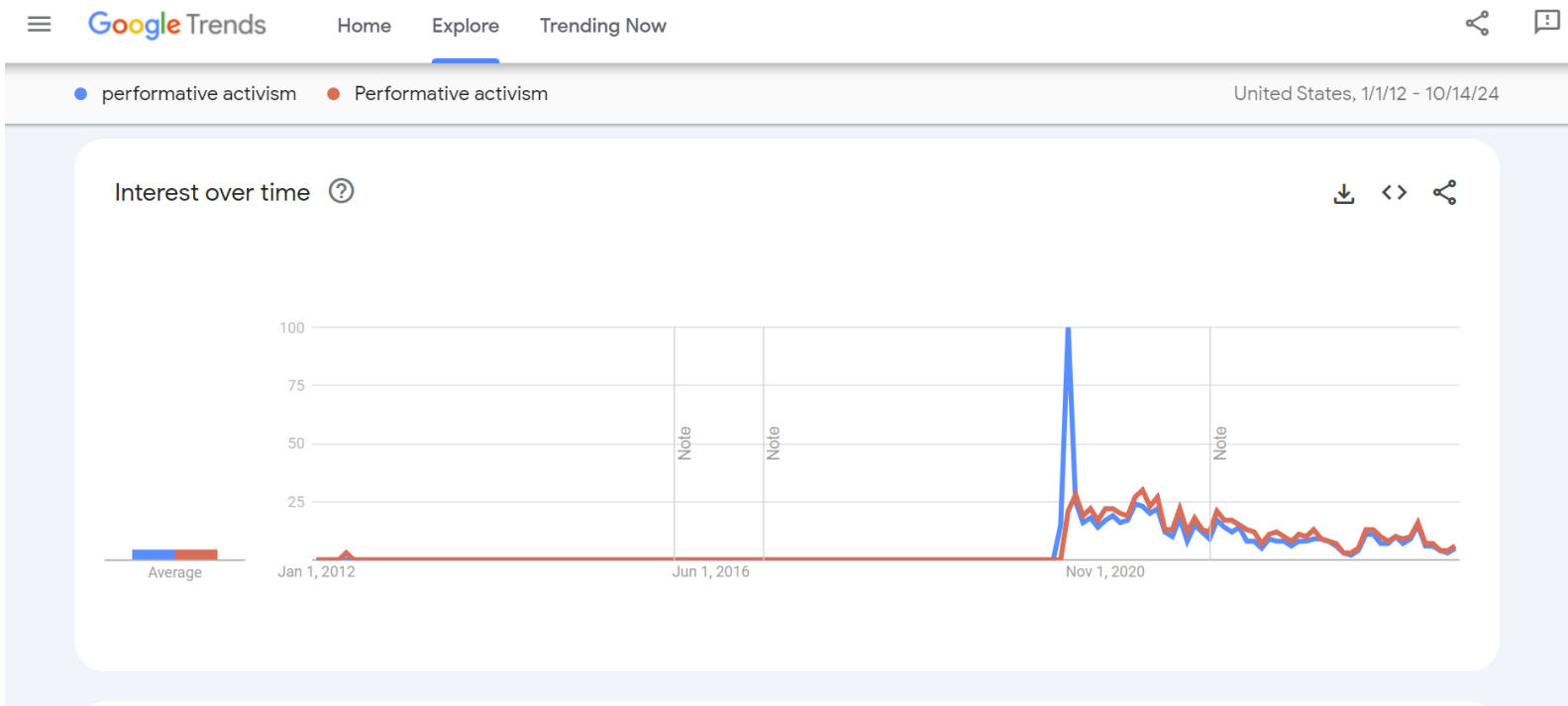
performative activism Search term

Performative activism Topic

+ Add comparison

United States 1/1/12 - 10/14/24 All categories Web Search

Note: This comparison contains both Search terms and Topics, which are measured differently. [LEARN MORE](#)



Google Trends

Another way to look at the history of performative activism is to see how successful it has been. Has it brought success to those who utilize it, or has it been dragging companies down from the start? In 2016, an article published in *The Minnesota Star Tribune* praised the rise of

Pride merchandise, specifically focusing on Target. A comment pulled from Reddit reads, “As a gay guy born and raised in Texas, I would have never imagined seeing this inside a Target. It made me weep. I’ve never seen a store do this in my 26 years” (Kumar, 2016). The executive director of Twin Cities Prides, Dot Belstler, says, “If somebody who doesn't come to Pride can get a pride-related shirt at Target — awesome. I think it's really important, especially for people who are just coming out or maybe they're from a small town or in an area that is not as supportive” (Kumar, 2016). It seemed that at the start, Target thrived under the guise of performative activism as those they were trying to connect to were happy to buy simply because they saw representation of themselves in the products.

Motivations

Performative activism seems easy to comprehend at first. As the name suggests and as stated above, it is activism that is performative, not genuine. This, however, often raises the question: Why do companies participate in performative activism? It is simple. The act of caring draws in important customers.

In 2022, there were an estimated 72.24 million millennials in the United States, making them the largest generation group and overtaking the baby boomers (Korhonen, 2023). In the eyes of the marketing world, this is a generation worth targeting, if not solely focusing on. Millennials are the fastest growing force in the marketplace and “account for an estimated \$1 trillion of U.S. current consumer spending” (Rudominer, n.d.). Aside from these numerical demographics, there are some key values that set this generation apart from the ones before it. One key value is social justice. Millennials often support societal changes, especially ones that assist those who are less privileged or face racial, sexual, or any other sort of discrimination. This is not to say that those who sought out social justice were not present before modern times, but

“the 10th annual Deloitte Global Millennial and Gen Z Survey reveals that [both generational groups] believe the world has reached a tipping point on issues such as racial justice, inequality and the environment” (Deloitte, 2021). Not only do these generations hold all individuals accountable but corporations as well. A study done by Horizon Media’s Finger on the Pulse revealed that “81 percent of Millennials expect companies to make a public commitment to good corporate citizenship” (Rudominer, n.d.). Companies can no longer scrape by doing the bare minimum. Companies must be and do right as “millennials say they are prepared to make personal sacrifices to make an impact on issues they care about, whether that’s paying more for a product (70 percent vs. 66 percent US average), sharing products rather than buying (66 percent vs. 56 percent) or taking a pay cut to work for a responsible company (62 percent vs. 56 percent)” (Rudominer, n.d.). It is no longer good enough to be neutral on social issues as the pressure to take a stand grows. Perhaps companies could hide behind neutrality in the past and brush issues under the rug as “not their business,” but this is rapidly changing.

One can also look at the psychological side of motivation. There are four key motivations to activism according to Maja Kutlaca and Helena R. M. Radke. These four types can be held within a person simultaneously, but their intensities may vary (Kutlaca & Helena, 2022). The first two stem from genuine concern, outgroup-focused motivation and moral motivation (Kutlaca & Helena, 2022). When following these motivation methods, social justice advocates who are not directly involved or affected put the disadvantaged group’s needs before their own and act on what they say. This is true activism, and it is the opposite of performative activism. On the other hand, the final two motives are selfish and nongenuine, and these often fuel performative activism. The main goals for those who partake in the performance are to look good and benefit, and they rarely have the intentions to partake in actual change. Kutlaca and Helena

note, “theoretical and empirical work on intergroup helping finds that advantaged groups may engage in helping [behaviors] in order to protect their high status” (Kutlaca & Helena, 2022). As for personal motivations, a person may engage in performative activism in order to “improve their personal public image, gain popularity and/or economic resources” (Kutlaca & Helena, 2022). To put it simply, performative activists put the advantaged group’s needs and feelings (often mirroring their own) above the disadvantaged group’s as they do not have said group’s best interests at heart.

Impact

Companies that partake in performative activism likely see it as nothing more than a marketing scheme. No one is hurt by the act, so there is nothing wrong with continuing onward with it. This, however, is far from the actual truth, and there are both positive and negative effects to performative activism.

The negative aside effects are a reactive chain of responses, and they all lead to the decreased wellbeing for the marginalized group overall (Kutlaca & Helena, 2022). The chain starts with the initial reaction to the performative activism, whether it be an advertisement or a product or service offered. Nowadays, people are suspicious of companies, and this is especially true for younger generations and those within disadvantaged communities. They can tell when a company is being genuine or not, and when they detect even the slightest bit of insincerity, they will back away. With the internet at their fingertips, word spreads fast, and those affected the most will demand the company behind the performance take responsibility. This call for accountability is then typically supported and echoed by other marginalized groups and social justice activists. While the company accused is suffering publicly and potentially monetarily, the people they attempted to falsely reach out to are suffering too. The failure to genuinely attract

marginalized group members leads to a lack of true perspective and instead places that power in the hands of the advantaged group (Kutlaca & Helena, 2022). The advantaged group can mean well, but nothing compares to lived-through, personal experiences. In short, a company's performative activism is a vicious cycle. The performance begins, those affected and activists call for responsibility, marginalized groups pull back, the power is placed in the advantaged group's hands, and the circle begins again.

An article written by Yomi Abdi of Yale Daily News summarizes another issue of performative activism perfectly: "A Tale of performative activism: How Black Lives Matter became just a trend." Abdi points out that 28 million people posted a black square to their Instagram feed in support of Black Lives Matter, but only 13 million signed the petition to arrest the police officers who killed George Floyd (Abdi, 2020). This is a problem. As discussed above, performative activism makes people feel good, but rarely do those who participate in it support things that will call for actual change and justice. Abdi writes, "And just like that, a movement was minimized to a moment... People have a tendency to create elaborate facades by projecting unrealistic lifestyles on social media. So, it makes sense they want to present themselves as racial justice advocates when everyone else is too. But, true activism starts with yourself. What are you doing when no one's watching?" (Abdi, 2020).

There is one positive to performative activism, and it is the feeling of acceptance, whether it is true acceptance or not (Kutlaca & Helena, 2022). It should not be a surprise to be told that humans "have a deep seated need to be liked, respected, and accepted" as we have all experienced this need at some point in our lives (Dobson-Smith, 2022). This is especially true when looking at those in marginalized groups who continuously face discrimination. For example, Devin Anders Muellenbach notes that "pride flags around campus also provides safety

and comfort for LGBTQ+ and questioning students” as “there can be extreme danger in coming out and being true to yourself” (Muellenbach, 2023). This article is an example of true activism, but the thought process behind wanting to belong and feel safe can be applied to performative acts and why there can be positive reactions. In essence, there is a comfort in belonging, even if the comfort is given under false pretenses.

Case Study: Bud Light

Background Information

On April 1st, 2023, Dylan Mulvaney, a transgender social media influencer, posted a video in duet with Bud Light to promote the March Madness contest the company was hosting (Holpuch, 2023). It should be noted that Mulvaney is not the typical wannabe influencer with no real backing to her name. Rather, she has 1.8 million Instagram followers along with 10.6 million followers on TikTok (Holpuch, 2023). Within the LGBTQ+ community, she is a highly recognized and beloved figure, originally growing her following through her “Days of Girlhood” series (Holpuch, 2023). As for the video, Mulvaney’s focus was on the Bud Light contest for March Madness. It had an overall playful, humorous tone, and she did take a drink on video. Within the skit, the influencer did mention that Bud Light sent her a gift because she had reached her 365th day in her “Day of Girlhood” series (Mulvaney, 2023).

The Peoples’ Reaction

Within mere hours of the campaign’s launch, Anheuser-Busch faced immediate backlash. Customers called for boycotts via Instagram and X (formally known as Twitter), and while some negative reactions were bound to occur, some complaints came from those least expected.

At the forefront of the boycott was American musician KidRock. On X, the singer posted a video of himself shooting three cases of Bud Light until they burst (KidRock, 2023). He ends the video by saying, “Fuck Bud Light, and fuck Anheuser-Busch. Have a terrific day,” while flicking off the camera (KidRock, 2023). The video currently has over 39,000 comments, 55,000 retweets, 5,100 saves, and 209,000 likes (KidRock, 2023). KidRock was just the start of the Bud Light boycott as other musicians stepped forward to protest the company’s “wokeness” including country music stars Travis Tritt, Riley Green, and John Rich (Smith, 2023). While KidRock was leading the anti-LGBTQ+ protesters, the LGBTQ+ community itself also had a few things to say about the campaign. In Greenwich Village, New York City, there is a historic LGBTQ+ bar and monument known as The Stonewall Inn. This bar and its patrons were the target audience of Bud Light’s campaign, yet the two owners and customers were far from pleased. A protest was staged where activists poured cases of Anheuser-Busch beers -- including Bud Light -- into the gutters (LGBTQ activists pour out Anheuser-Busch beers outside Stonewall Inn, 2021). Co-owner Stacy Lentz says, “the reason we did that... was because they were out there waving the rainbow flag very vehemently and then turning around and contributing to anti-LGBTQ legislators, which can't happen” (Power, 2023). It should be noted that The Stonewall Inn had protested against Anheuser-Busch beers even before the Mulvaney collaboration. In 2021, the inn hosted a “Keep Your Pride” campaign “where it refused to serve the products of companies that claimed to be LGBTQ+ allies but also donated money to anti-LGBTQ+ legislators” (Power, 2023). Lentz notes “that since 2015, the company has given more than \$35,000 to politicians who have supported bills that are clearly anti-transgender youth” (LGBTQ activists pour out Anheuser-Busch beers outside Stonewall Inn, 2021). The Stonewall Inn’s message is clear and concise: “Don't cave to

haters and make sure that as a business and as a brand...put your money where your mouth is” (Power, 2023).

On April 14, 2023, Anheuser-Busch’s CEO Brendan Whitworth released a statement on the parent company’s official website. Titled “Our Responsibility To America,” it reads:

As the CEO of a company founded in America’s heartland more than 165 years ago, I am responsible for ensuring every consumer feels proud of the beer we brew.

We’re honored to be part of the fabric of this country. Anheuser-Busch employs more than 18,000 people and our independent distributors employ an additional 47,000 valued colleagues. We have thousands of partners, millions of fans and a proud history supporting our communities, military, first responders, sports fans and hard-working Americans everywhere.

We never intended to be part of a discussion that divides people. We are in the business of bringing people together over a beer.

My time serving this country taught me the importance of accountability and the values upon which America was founded: freedom, hard work and respect for one another. As CEO of Anheuser-Busch, I am focused on building and protecting our remarkable history and heritage.

I care deeply about this country, this company, our brands and our partners. I spend much of my time traveling across America, listening to and learning from our customers, distributors and others.

Moving forward, I will continue to work tirelessly to bring great beers to consumers across our nation.

Brendan Whitworth (Our Responsibility To America, 2023).

The Numbers

Prior to the official Anheuser-Busch report, Wall Street analysts cited Beer Marketer's Insights and noted that "the trend of declining beer volumes is worsening and may be down more than 25% in April while US distributor relations appear to be at an all-time low" (Brooks, 2023). A second group, Bump Williams Consulting, concluded that \$71.5 million worth of Bud Light was sold in the week ending April 29, a 23% drop compared to the year prior, and in the same week, Budweiser sales reached \$31.5 million, down approximately 11% (Brooks, 2023). It should be noted that these drops in sales came not only from Bud Light but from other Anheuser-Busch brands as well, such as Michelob Ultra, Busch Light, and Natural Light (Brooks, 2023).

In August of 2023, the official second quarter results report for Anheuser-Busch was released. In the document, the company reported that revenue within the United States "declined by 10.5% impacted by volume performance" (AB InBev Reports Second Quarter 2023 Results, 2023). What is interesting, however, is that Anheuser-Busch did not suffer an overall loss. In fact, the company's total revenue went up 7.2% (AB InBev Reports Second Quarter 2023 Results, 2023).

One year later (2024), Anheuser-Busch sales are still "flat," and it has lost its crown to Modelo for the first time in 22 years (NBC News, 2024).

Discussion of the Bud Light Case Study and More

First and foremost, the following question must be answered: Is the Bud Light controversy an example of performative activism? The answer is a clear yes. When reading the definition of performative activism- "...someone from a nonmarginalized group professing support and solidarity with a marginalized group, but in a way that is not helpful" (Kalina, 2020)- it is easy to see how and why the Bud Light campaign falls under this definition. Anheuser-Busch is the nonmarginalized group while the LGBTQ+ community is the marginalized one. The company centered its campaign around Mulvaney in hopes of attracting her community and those similar. Anheuser-Busch pretended to be for the LGBTQ+ community, yet it was found "that since 2015, the company has given more than \$35,000 to politicians who have supported bills that are clearly anti-transgender youth" (LGBTQ activists pour out Anheuser-Busch beers outside Stonewall Inn, 2021). To put it simply, this alone shows that Anheuser-Busch was not sincere about its campaign and was instead putting on an act thus pointing towards the conclusion that it was performative activism all along.

A second factor one can look at is the reactions of the public, specifically those of The Stonewall Inn and Brendan Whitworth. As mentioned above, performative marketing leads to a predominantly negative chain of reaction for the marginalized group (Kutlaca & Helena, 2022). For this case specifically, once again, Anheuser-Busch tried to portray themselves as allies to the LGBTQ+ community by partnering with Mulvaney. Conservative backlash, however, had them pulling back quickly, and Whitworth was forced to make a public announcement. To many, the announcement felt dismissive as if Anheuser-Busch wanted to sweep everything under the rug. The message came off as apologetic but not to the defense of the LGBTQ+ community rather to those boycotting. The fact that Anheuser-Busch did not stand firm on their allyship along with

their history of donating to anti-LGBTQ+ legislators did not sit well for those at The Stonewall Inn as they promptly protested, refusing to be used by those pretending to care. As previously noted above, this failure to attract minority group members leads to a power imbalance between them and the advantaged group (Kutlaca & Helena, 2022). This then causes direct harm to the marginalized community as the feeling of not being heard or overlooked often has people stepping back from positions where their sincerity could be of use (Kutlaca & Helena, 2022).

Another interesting analysis to do with this case study is to compare Anheuser-Busch to another brand who does not participate in performative activism. One brand that immediately comes to mind is Ben & Jerry's. Ben & Jerry's is well-known for its activism and how it supports social justice movements and grassroots organizations. On their website, the company's mission statement is as follows: "We believe that ice cream can change the world. We have a progressive, nonpartisan social mission that seeks to meet human needs and eliminate injustices in our local, national, and international communities by integrating these concerns in our day-to-day business activities" (Our Values, Activism and Mission, n.d.). Ben & Jerry's does this by releasing progressive advertisements on their social media-- informing customers about the Conference of the Parties (COP)-- and "engaging employees, giving to Vermont communities, and supporting social justice" through their foundation (What We Do, n.d.). In comparison to Anheuser-Busch who tried to half-heartedly align themselves with the LGBTQ+ community, Ben & Jerry's has stood strong on its stances, and this is why so many people support their brand. They see themselves being truly represented and cared about, and this genuine support has both minority groups and those outside of them wanting to purchase Ben & Jerry's.

One should also look at the monetary side of this Bud Light case study. As stated above, revenue within the United States "declined by 10.5% impacted by volume performance," yet

total global revenue went up 7.2% (AB InBev Reports Second Quarter 2023 Results, 2023). It is clear and without a doubt that the United States market saw a revenue decline, but overall, does a meager 10.5% matter to a corporate giant such as Anheuser-Busch? This thesis argues yes. Many are aware of the fact that a business's primary purpose is to maximize profits for both its owners and stockholders, no matter how big or how small the company is. For Anheuser-Busch, it is no different. While a decrease in 10.5% within the United States did not lower overall revenue, it did tarnish the company's reputation, and the repercussions of the protests are still being felt to this day. This loss should not have occurred in the first place, thus, Anheuser-Busch does care about regaining this 10.5% despite having a positive revenue growth globally. Again, maximizing profits is what company strive for, especially those as large as Anheuser-Busch who face high levels of competition such as Coors Brewing Company and The Boston Beer Company. Losing footing in a market as significant as the Americans can and has led to Anheuser-Busch being moved to second-best. Essentially, money is what matters to these corporate giants who have hundreds of stockholders behind them, so even the slightest loss will have them quickly fixing their misstep. It would not be too bold to say that Anheuser-Busch will most likely not be backing another progressive movement any time soon if ever again.

One thing theses often look for is a glimpse into the future. How will the thesis look in a certain number of years? What updates will need to be made, and how can other researchers build off of it and expand on our knowledge of the topic? More often than not, these future predictions often take place years later as it takes time to see drastic change. For this thesis, however, things have changed rapidly in a single year. In May of this year (2024), NBC News released a video segment on Target, discussing its decrease in Pride merchandise. A TikTok from the user @manicpixiegothmom is featured at the start. The person says, "I noticed that Target has

some Pride items online but conveniently not in stores. Not that I really love the whole rainbow capitalism, but the fact that they aren't even trying to get our money this year..." (NBC News, 2024). The term "rainbow capitalism" is similar to "performative activism," but it is strictly used for performative activism in regards to the LGBTQ+ community or Pride. Target claims that the move was done "based on historical sales performance," and NBC research supports this claim, finding that "Target sales dropped for the first time in six years following 2023's conservative backlash over its Pride products in store" (NBC News, 2024). Molly McPherson, a crisis communication strategist, further comments on the situation, saying that "there is a price on principles" (NBC News, 2024). She also points out that because 2024 is an election year, this topic has been brought to the forefront of voters and consumers (NBC News, 2024). McPherson brings up the Bud Light controversy and states, "No company out there wants to lose sales. When it comes to the marketing and the advertising, that's where they don't want to experience the blowback, and that's where you see them slowly walking back into their own closet" (NBC News, 2024). All of this is further supported by a report segment conducted by Maura Barret, an NBC News correspondent. She notes that just two years ago she did a similar report on how corporations stepped forward to address social issues because that is what consumers expected of them (NBC News, 2024). In 2024, however, things have changed drastically, and she ties it to the recent political and social attacks the United States has seen on gender affirming care and the sudden surge of the anti-trans movement (NBC News, 2024). Companies are no longer taking a stand on social issues such as Pride as they are afraid of the public backlash that is bound to occur, inevitably leading to a loss of profit. Essentially, in just one year, the usage of performative activism and public response has changed completely, which raises the question:

What will the future of performative activism look like in 2025? In 2026? Will there be a point where performative activism is no longer used in marketing?

Conclusion

As stated above, performative activism is facing a clear, rapid decline in the marketing and advertising industry. Companies are fearful of public ridicule and being called out for their actions, and targeted consumers are beginning to see the true motivations behind these campaigns. There is often no real weight or support for these minority groups, and the consumer refuses to be taken advantage of. This leads performative activism to two different yet similar states in the near future. Either performative activism will be used less yet still active at times, or the marketing technique will disappear forever. Future research can and should be done to see what happens to the act of performative marketing as its fall from popularity was just as fast as its rise. Another potential area of future research could be the acknowledgement of the technique itself if it remains. When this thesis was created, many asked what performative marketing was in the first place, so it could be interesting to see if this changes in the future. If there is a change in knowledge, does it encourage or stop consumers from shopping at certain places? Does it encourage them to speak up against the campaigns and push consumers to true, activist-based companies?

One thing is for certain, however, and that is Anheuser-Busch has brought performative activism to the spotlight in these recent years. Its Bud Light controversy has metaphorically checked off every box under what qualifies for performative activism, and other corporate giants such as Target are weary of accidentally becoming the next Bud Light. The marketing industry

has changed its stances on social issues since the blunder, and it seems as if only brands who are genuine to the causes they claim to support are still speaking out. Whether performative activism in marketing is still active years into the future is unknown, but it has undoubtedly risen and fallen remarkably fast over these last few years.

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