**Headline:** This Pride Month Let’s Remember: Corporations Are Not Allies

**Teaser:** The Target company’s capitulation to homophobes and transphobes is a testament to the dangers of relying on corporations to uphold social justice.

By Sonali Kolhatkar

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**[Article Body:]**

Just days before the start of June, celebrated around the [country](https://news.yahoo.com/pride-month-everything-know-lgbtq-161454932.html) and [world](https://en.as.com/latest_news/is-gay-pride-month-celebrated-in-other-countries-where-are-some-of-the-biggest-events-n/) as “Pride month,” Target corporation decided that proudly allying with the LGBTQIA+ community by selling Pride-themed merchandise was not worth the alienation of bigots. [Facing rightwing violence](https://apnews.com/article/target-pride-collection-lgbtq-merchandise-backlash-cf4a19844579e6041c6938b13568e17c) and what it called “[volatile circumstances](https://corporate.target.com/press/releases/2023/05/Target-Statement-on-2023-Pride-Collection),” the company pulled some of its rainbow-festooned products and moved pride-related displays to the back of stores in some locations.

In 2015, Caroline Wanga, then Target’s senior director of diversity and inclusion, [said](https://corporate.target.com/article/2015/09/equality-act), “Target proudly stands with the LGBT community through all that we do.” But nearly eight years later, it didn’t take very much for the company to back off from such a bold statement via its actions.

As per [AP](https://apnews.com/article/target-pride-collection-lgbtq-merchandise-backlash-cf4a19844579e6041c6938b13568e17c), “Target said that customers knocked down Pride displays at some stores, angrily approached workers[,] and posted threatening videos on social media from inside the stores.” Unsurprisingly, the greatest backlash was centered on the company’s sales of “tuck-friendly” bathing suits aimed at adult transgender people. Conservative culture warriors falsely claimed that such bathing suits were being sold in the children’s section—a lie consistent with their claims that transgender people have an agenda of “grooming” children.

In addition to illustrating just how far homophobic and transphobic forces will go to dehumanize a significant swath of the population, the Target brouhaha is a testament to the dangers of relying on corporations to uphold social justice.

Corporations don’t have values—at least not ones centered on human rights anyway. Individuals at corporations may espouse values of social justice. Marketing departments may capitalize on public acceptance of social justice to sell their products. But the only values that corporations inherently hold are ones that maximize profits as voraciously as possible, bound only by the strictest regulations.

Take the advice that marketing expert Allen Adamson of Metaforce gave Target. According to [ABC7](https://abc7ny.com/target-removes-pride-pulls-merch-collection-lgbtq/13299208/), Adamson “said Target should have thought through the potential for backlash and taken steps to avoid it, like varying the products it sells by region.” In other words, Target should have been more careful about rearranging its products so as to avoid igniting the lynch mobs. “The country is far less homogenous than it ever was,” explained Adamson, euphemistically. “For any brand, it’s not ‘one size fits all’ anymore.” In other words, we surely can’t expect everyone in America to respect the rights of minorities!

For decades, “[Pride month](https://www.american.edu/cas/news/the-first-pride-was-a-riot.cfm)” has been an opportunity to celebrate the lives, rights, and achievements of the LGBTQIA+ community. Born out of the 1969 Stonewall uprising in New York, and stemming from the (now-quaint-sounding because it leaves out other parts of the spectrum) label “gay pride,” the idea was for sexual minorities to come out of the shadows that society had long relegated them to, eschew the shame foisted upon them by rigid notions of heterosexuality and misogynist patriarchy and generations of toxic masculinity. For decades, Pride month celebrations and [parades](https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/gabrielsanchez/pride-parade-1990s-history-rewind) were, by their mere existence, [political acts](https://www.nytimes.com/1994/03/12/us/boston-parade-canceled-over-gay-issue.html). Alongside the glitz and glamor as a way to take up space were such serious issues as the government’s neglect of the AIDS crisis.

Eventually, through concerted activism, narrative shifting, policy victories, and Supreme Court decisions, a community struggling for visibility and equal rights began enjoying greater acceptance. With that came companies like Target, ready to market Pride-themed products and eager to be seen by its customers as moving forward with the times. Pride had begun to go mainstream–until the right-wing mob amped up the hate.

An extensive 2019 report for the Washington Post titled “[Pride for Sale](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/opinions/pride-for-sale/?itid=lk_inline_manual_18),” pointedly claimed that the Pride month celebration now “sometimes seems more retail than riot.” Still, activist Evan Greer, in a [video portion](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2gLFFFk48A) of the report said that corporations embracing Pride was “not wholly a bad thing,” rather it should be seen as “a symbol of our growing economic and political power.”

Greer was right. Corporate support of causes is simply public relations. It is a sign that the culture is shifting thanks to the hard work of those impacted. It does not mean the business actually cares. Target’s recent capitulation to right-wing bigots proves this point. And it’s not alone among companies facing pressure from bigots.

[Anheuser-Busch also made headlines](https://variety.com/2023/digital/news/dylan-mulvaney-addresses-bud-light-backlash-1235597610/) for trying to appease the right-wingers who took aim at transgender influencer Dylan Mulvaney’s partnership promoting Bud Light beer. Instead of standing up for Mulvaney after she and the company faced backlash, a corporate spokesperson claimed that Anheuser-Busch, “never intended to be part of a discussion that divides people.” In doing so, the company appeared to concede that Mulvaney’s right to exist was up for debate.

Right-wing culture wars have historically been highly effective at turning the tide of public opinion. CNN’s [Oliver Darcy warns](https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/31/media/pride-month-reliable-sources/index.html), “the supposedly anti-cancel culture crowd is leading the summer’s biggest cancel culture campaign” in targeting companies that have capitalized on Pride month. In addition to Target and Anheuser-Busch, conservative bigots and right-wing media outlets have taken aim at [State Farm, Lego, Nike](https://www.mediamatters.org/diversity-discrimination/timeline-rights-crusade-against-lgbtq-corporate-pride-month-campaigns), and even the [Los Angeles Dodgers](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/18/sports/baseball/dodgers-pride-night.html).

[Hyperfocus on Pride-themed](https://www.mediamatters.org/fox-news/fox-covered-targets-pride-month-displays-hours-and-allegations-abuse-illinois-catholic) campaigns enables conservative media companies like Fox News to whip up outrage against minorities, which they hope will translate into votes for the GOP, a party whose real agenda has focused on [enriching billionaires](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2023/05/15/debt-ceiling-negotiations-deadline-default/). Those same wealthy elites are the ones who own and run companies like Target.

[Vox’s Emily Stewart](https://www.vox.com/politics/2023/5/25/23737338/target-abprallen-pride-boycott-bud-light-trans-controversy-stock-price) points out, “For many queer people, rainbow capitalism has always been a bit complicated—a sometimes-uncomfortable corporate bedfellow that nevertheless did confer a sense of social legitimacy.” But Target will not stand up for the rights of LGBTQIA+ folks. Corporations will run at the first sign of trouble to their bottom lines.

What the corporate decision-makers at Target and Anheuser-Busch are missing is that the cultural pendulum has not swung away from LGBTQIA+ rights—yet. GLAAD’s 2023 [Accelerating Acceptance study](https://www.glaad.org/publications/accelerating-acceptance-2023) found that among those who do not identify as LGBTQ support for equal rights is at an all-time high. According to the study, “An 84 [percent] supermajority of non-LGBTQ Americans support equal rights for the LGBTQ community,” and “A 91 [percent] supermajority of non-LGBTQ Americans agree that LGBTQ people should have the freedom to live their [lives] and not be discriminated against.”

These numbers are deeply heartening and reveal just how out-of-touch Republican and conservative leaders are in their attacks on queer Americans, and just how badly corporations who want to portray themselves as “allies” are missing the target—pun definitely intended.