

Bud Light has managed to unite the left and right in anger

Sales are down 3 percent for the year after the company made a bid for inclusion and then backpedaled



By Taylor Telford

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The parent company of Bud Light will triple its marketing spending in the United States this summer. (Nam Huh/Associated Press)

CORRECTION

A previous version of this article misspelled the first name of Anheuser-Busch chief executive Brendan Whitworth. The article has been corrected.

Bud Light, the most popular beer in America, has managed to anger just about everybody. Belinda Mendoza manages Dragster, a queer bar in Seattle that caters to the kind of customer Bud Light was hoping to court with its recent partnership with trans actress and influencer Dylan Mulvaney.

But when the brand failed to stick up for Mulvaney after her Instagram ad provoked calls from conservatives for a [boycott](#), Mendoza says it was an easy decision to stop carrying products from Anheuser-Busch InBev, the parent company of Bud Light. AB InBev beers had not been all that popular with her customers, she said, and the company “has never really aligned with what I believe in.”

AB InBev is in damage-control mode as it seeks to squash the backlash from the Mulvaney partnership. The company is planning to triple its marketing spending in the United States over the summer, according to [reporting](#) from Ad Age. It is also offering free cases of Bud Light to wholesale employees, according to [reporting](#) from the Wall Street Journal, and is assuring consumers it “never intended to be part of a discussion that divides people” according to a letter from Anheuser-Busch chief executive Brendan Whitworth.

Its bid for inclusion has barely dented its market dominance. AB InBev said on a recent earnings call that declines during the first three weeks of April, as uproar mounted, represented only a 1 percent drop in its global sales volumes. But the magnitude of backlash shows the risk brands face in trying to expand their customer base, especially when doing so puts them in the crossfire of the culture wars.

Todd Evans, chief executive of Rivendell Media, which specializes in queer marketing, said the about-face from Bud Light in its partnership with Mulvaney made the situation worse, creating a case study of “what not to do.” Its first mistake, Evans said, was kicking off the effort to expand its audience “in an open digital environment where anything can go anywhere” rather than with a traditional targeted ad.

“Bud Light remains the number one brand in the U.S. nationally in volume and dollar sales,” AB InBev said in a statement to The Washington Post. On the recent earnings call, AB InBev chief executive Michel Doukeris told investors the company believes it has the “experience, the resources and the partners” to manage the controversy that has followed the Mulvaney partnership.

Other big companies like Levi’s and Disney have faced backlash in the past for courting queer markets, Evans notes, but calls for boycotts have fallen flat when the companies involved have stood by their marketing efforts. Bud Light is struggling, Evans said, because “they took a stand and did not stand behind it.”

If AB InBev had said, “we stand on the side of equality,” Evans said, the opposition “probably would have died there.” Bud Light sales are down 3 percent for the year, compared to the same period last year, according to data from Bump Williams Consulting. Case sales slumped 8 percent in the same time frame, founder and chief executive Bump Williams said.

[[The real reason Mexico suddenly dominates global beer exports](#)]

Bud Light has been trying to alter its image. In a podcast released in March, its vice president of marketing, Alissa Heinerscheid, said that the brand is “in decline” and expressed a need to evolve its “fratty” identity into something more inclusive and appealing to younger consumers.

When Heinerscheid pondered how the brand might change, she aimed for “a campaign that is truly inclusive and feels lighter and brighter and different and appeals to women and to men,” she said on the “Make Yourself at Home” [podcast](#). Amid the uproar over the partnership with Mulvaney, Heinerscheid and her boss were placed on leave. Bud Light started that rebranding effort with a clip related to March Madness that Mulvaney posted to her Instagram, in which she showed off a can of beer bearing her likeness that AB InBev had sent her to commemorate a year since her transition to womanhood.

The blowback was swift and noisy but not altogether surprising, given how much the move departed from the traditional identity of Bud Light, according to Cary Cooper, professor of organizational psychology at the University of Manchester and a scholar with the Academy of Management. “They are trying to make sure they don’t lose either of these demographics,” Cooper said. “I don’t know if that is going to be very effective.”

In an [interview](#) with the Financial Times, Doukeris blamed the hit to Bud Light on “misinformation and confusion” online about the extent of its partnership with Mulvaney, which left some consumers under the impression that “every can would be like the one that was in that post.” Others thought the can commemorating Mulvaney marked the start of an official Bud Light campaign. “We never intended to make it for general production and sale for the public,” Doukeris told the Financial Times. “It was one post. It was not an advertisement.”

The Bud Light partnership with Mulvaney touched a nerve at a time when anti-transgender legislation is on the rise across the country. In 2023, Republican state legislators have advanced dozens of pieces of [legislation](#) seeking to restrict transgender people’s access to health care, sports and public accommodations, and prohibit the ability to change a person’s name or gender on a driver’s license or birth certificate.

Transgender Americans experience stigma and systemic inequality in many aspects of their lives, according to a recent broad [survey](#) conducted by The Post and KFF. In the poll, 63 percent of transgender adults reported that they “sometimes” or “frequently” feel discriminated against because of their gender identity or expression.

Mulvaney did not respond to a request for comment. As uproar to her Bud Light ad mounted, the influencer took a break from social media. She addressed the situation for the first time in an Instagram video April 27, nearly a month after the backlash began.

Mulvaney did not mention Bud Light by name but said that recent events had practically “killed the people-pleaser” in her and expressed frustration with the ways she has been dehumanized. “I have always tried to love everyone, you know, even the people who make it really, really hard,” Mulvaney said.