

Pride Month support can generate 320% more positive social media posts for companies; dropping support can increase online negativity by 165%, study finds

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ABSTRACT

A study from Montclair State University faculty in the Joetta Di Bella and Fred C. Sautter III Center for Strategic Communication in the School of Communication and Media showed the ongoing commitment to Pride Month by Universal Studios has been received positively online. In contrast, Target's rolling back of support for Pride Month and diversity/inclusion elicited negative reactions in social media. Results show 320% more positive emotional sentiment in posts about Universal's #loveisuniversal campaign, with 85% of posts advocating #BoycottTarget expressing negative emotions towards the company including anger, disgust, fear, and sadness. #BoycottTarget posts also contained 165% more negative emotions in relation to the company, as opposed to the "63% Joy" #loveisuniversal elicited. Overall, 105,000 posts mentioning #loveisuniversal or #BoycottTarget were evaluated for this study and Google Trends analysis reflects spikes in activity towards both hashtags around Pride Month. Importantly, the study found

more posts and engagement expressing negativity about Target stepping back on inclusion than there were about Universal's ongoing support.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Corporations have faced an increasingly volatile climate in regards to the challenging area of Corporate Social Advocacy (Lee, 2024; Lim and Zhang, 2025; Rim et al., 2024). Corporations taking a stand on issues of public concern can create reputational risks along with opportunities. As Dodd and Supa (2015) note, “corporate social advocacy (is) a strong indicator for potential financial success” (2015: 292), but such success may be hindered by publics alienated through a company’s advocacy stance.

In the current context, corporate actions related to diversity and inclusion have become a lightning rod for controversy, especially in the online space. Company support for Pride and the LGBTQ+ community has appeared to stoke divisions and counter actions by some consumers. For instance, when the Walt Disney Corporation made a statement against Florida’s “Parental Rights in Education” bill (popularly referred to as “Don’t Say Gay”), a widespread online campaign sought to link Disney to “grooming” or the abuse/exploitation of children (Peterka-Benton, D., Benton, B., & Penney, J., 2023). These messages may have contributed to the underperformance of subsequent Disney movies that offered a message of inclusion. When Bud Light showed support for trans influencer Dylan Mulvaney, online backlash and an organized boycott campaign resulted a 32% sales reduction for the brand (Liaukonyte et al., 2024). Far from isolated, consumer action against companies overtly embracing inclusion appears to be far reaching (Cho, 2023).

With the perceived cultural movement towards “anti-woke” sentiment (French, 2025), companies will increasingly face the difficult choice of embracing diversity (with the risk of alienating those who reject diversity) or backing away from inclusive messaging (with the risk of alienating consumers who make purchase decisions based on company inclusion). This dichotomy

can be especially challenging in periods of national dialogue, advocacy, and celebrations such as Pride Month in June.

TARGET AND UNIVERSAL: DIFFERING STRATEGIC APPROACHES

Corporate response to this tension has varied. Disney, for example, has attempted to mitigate their content promoting inclusion with messages of support for those disagreeing with inclusion, to varying levels of effectiveness (Chapman, 2023). Seeking to appease all sides with advocacy would appear to be self-defeating; both supporters and dissenters may view the company's messaging as inauthentic and authenticity is essential for advocacy (Lim and Zhang, 2025). Consumers tend to evaluate advocacy by standards of "truthfulness, persistence, commitment, and congruence" (Lee, 2024: 1) meaning that mitigating support to appease different publics may be perceived as at odds with the advocacy's intent. As such, this study will look at public response to the diversity/inclusion advocacy messages of two companies engaging in distinct approaches to backlash risks in the current context.

The Target Corporation was previously considered by many as a gold standard for inclusion and support for diversity. From their marketing communications to their in-store offerings, Target made their support for diverse communities an essential feature of the brand experience. This was challenged in 2023, when an organized campaign spread online targeted the company for its Pride Month displays. Data suggests company sales declined with this backlash with more extreme opponents threatening the safety of store staff over the displays (Meyersohn, 2023). Target's primary response to the 2023 backlash was an attempt to quell concern from potential opponents through the elimination of Pride Month displays in some stores and a general de-emphasis on such displays companywide (Valinsky, 2024). After the election of President Trump in November of 2024, Target (potentially seeing a shift in societal preferences overall) further rolled back on all diversity commitments in January of 2025 (D'innocenzio, 2025). Rather

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than exiting the controversy, Target's actions created a counter backlash (including the emergence of the #BoycottTarget campaign) with Human Rights Campaign (an LGBTQ+ advocacy group) President Kelley Robinson stating:

Extremist groups want to divide us and ultimately don't just want rainbow products to disappear; they want us to disappear. The LGBTQ+ community has celebrated Pride with Target for the past decade. Target needs to stand with us and double-down on their commitment to us (Stewart, 2023).

In contrast, Universal Studios (its theme park division in particular) has made Pride-based branding an essential feature of company messaging. Their ongoing #loveisuniversal campaign has sought to express inclusion and to display the company's welcoming of LGBTQ+ guests and allies. Universal's official Facebook page announced this year's event with the following statement:

Love is Universal celebrates love and inclusion during Pride month in June. Join the celebration with specialty food and beverage offerings, CityWalk and Hard Rock Hotel entertainment, and Love is Universal merchandise. Through August, 100% of profits for the Love Is Universal merchandise collection will be donated to local non-profit organizations that support and engage the LGBTQIA+ community.

As noted, authenticity is important for perceptions of a company's stance on a topic of social concern (Lee, 2024; Lim and Zhang, 2025). To that end, Universal has taken steps to differentiate from perceptions of superficial "rainbow capitalism" by investing all profits from Pride Month related events and merchandise into LGBTQ+ charities:



Figure 1: Universal Donations

Broadening the campaign further, Universal has stated that they see this message of inclusion as extending beyond June to accommodate an entire summer of activities as part of ongoing company values (Libbey, 2023). Such a stance is not without risk, however. The theme park division of Universal serves a similar market niche to Disney which experienced the previously noted backlash. The significant visibility of the #loveisuniversal campaign would appear to potentially invite detractors, especially in the online space.

As social media has served as a contested space for discourse around areas like diversity, inclusion, and Pride Month, the two contrasting approaches of Target and Universal merits scrutiny. With that in mind, the following two exploratory questions emerge:

Q1: What are the distinctions in social media sentiment in relation to the #BoycottTarget and #loveisuniversal hashtags?

Q2: What is the comparative frequency of appearance of the #BoycottTarget and #loveisuniversal hashtags in the social media space?

RESEARCH METHOD

To answer these questions, this research employs the artificial intelligence (AI)-driven social media analytics tool, Brandwatch, to collect data in the forms of social conversations. Brandwatch is a leading analytics tool to derive social intelligence regarding consumer insights, influencer marketing, competitor analysis, reputation monitoring, and benchmark studies. Essentially, Brandwatch was utilized as a social listening tool to understand the sentiment, perceptions, trends, and reactions of social media users' conversations pertaining to both Universal Studios and Target in relation to their stances on pride and inclusion more broadly.

A Google Trend Analysis was also conducted to assess online search activity for related to the Target boycott and the #loveisuniversal campaign. A key feature of Google Trends analysis is that it allows for identification of items of interest for internet users (Nghiem et al., 2016). These analyses are "normalized to the highest volume of searches for that term over the time period being studied. This index ranges from 0 to 100, with 100 recorded on the date that saw the highest relative search volume activity for that term" (Arora et al., 2019: 338). Search interest in a specific topic has reliably forecast social media posts and actions related to that topic (McCarthy, 2010).

RESULTS

In answering the first exploratory question regarding sentiment, a distinction in social media reaction to the two approaches was clearly identified. In data collected from April 21, 2025, to June 19, 2025, the 18,000 “#loveisuniversal” posts studied expressed defined and overwhelmingly positive sentiment.

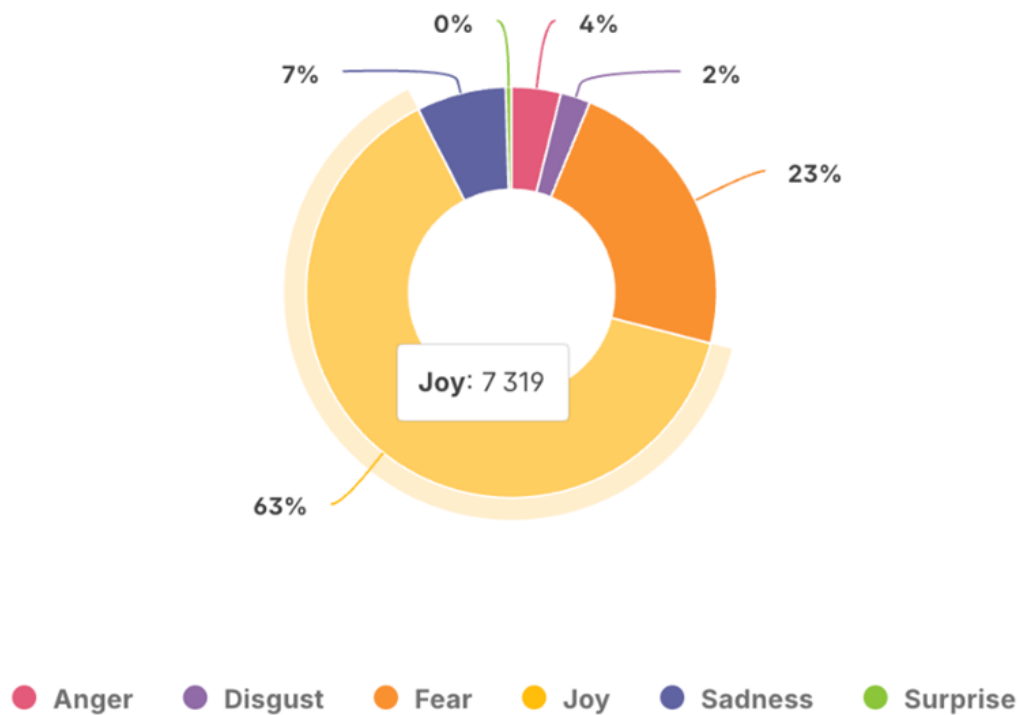


Figure 2 Social Media Sentiment: #loveisuniversal

“Joy” was identified as the emotion present in #loveisuniversal posts at a rate of nearly double all other identified emotions.

In contrast, posts containing the hashtag #BoycottTarget were defined by negative emotions. In data collected from April 21, 2025, to June 19, 2025, the 87,000 “#BoycottTarget” posts studied expressed overwhelmingly negative emotions including feelings of anger, disgust, sadness, and fear.

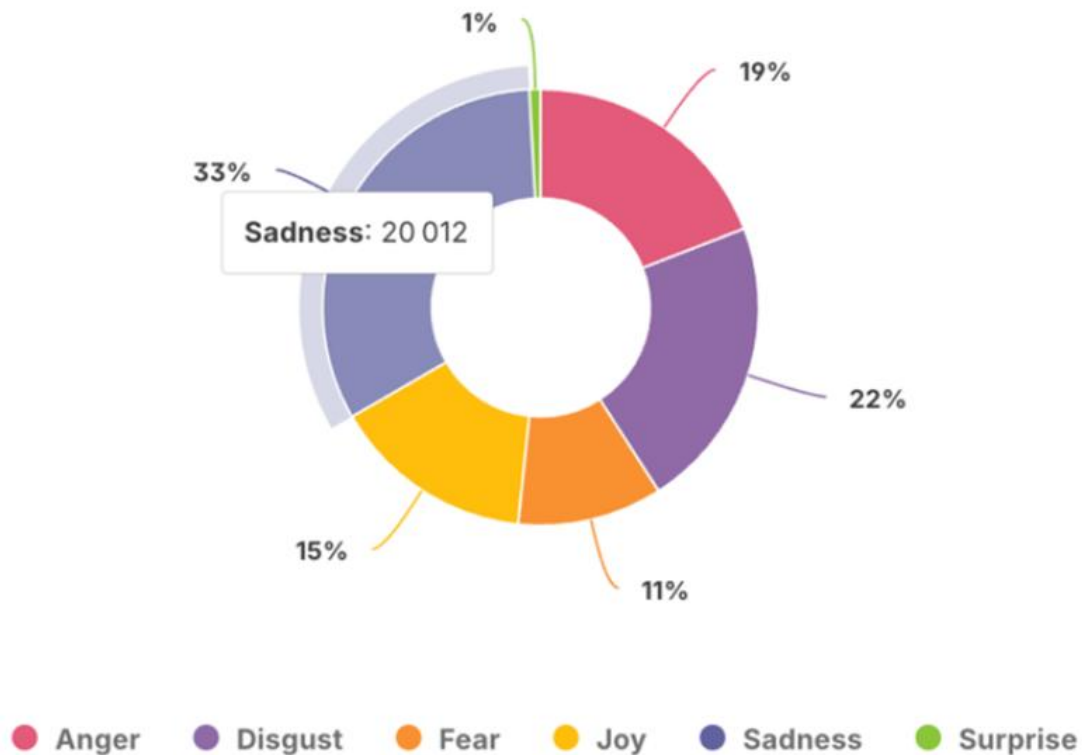


Figure 3 Social Media Sentiment: #BoycottTarget

Cumulatively, #loveisuniversal appears to have elicited reactions of positive emotions, while #BoycottTarget facilitated social media posts expressing negative emotions.

In considering the second research question, visibility and number of posts in the period study both suggest reach for the respective hashtag queries. In data collected from April 21, 2025, to June 19, 2025, there were 18,000 posts identified using the #loveisuniversal hashtag and 87,000 posts representing #BoycottTarget, with a respective 166% and 23% jump in the period the hashtags were studied.

Universal Studios: #LoveIsUniversal

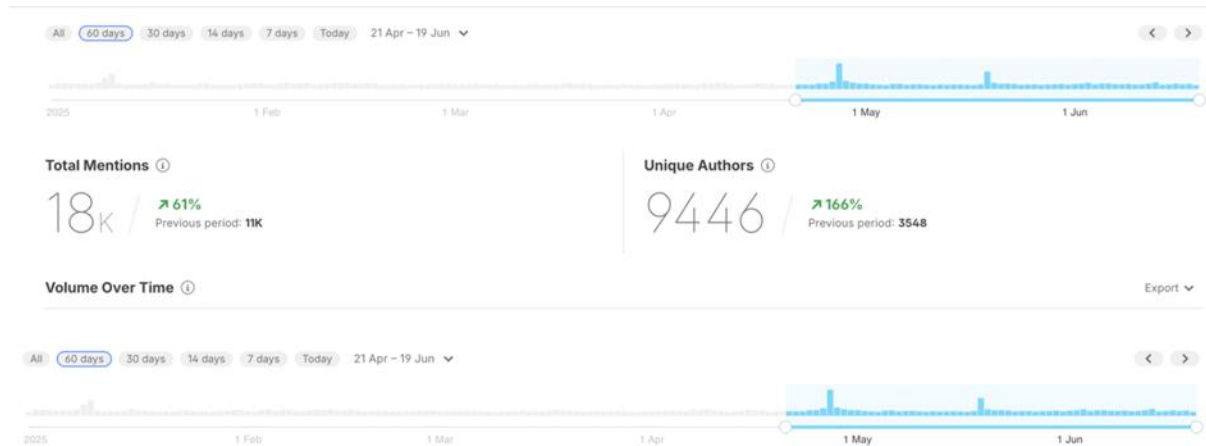


Figure 4 Social Media Frequency: #loveisuniversal

Target: #BoycottTarget

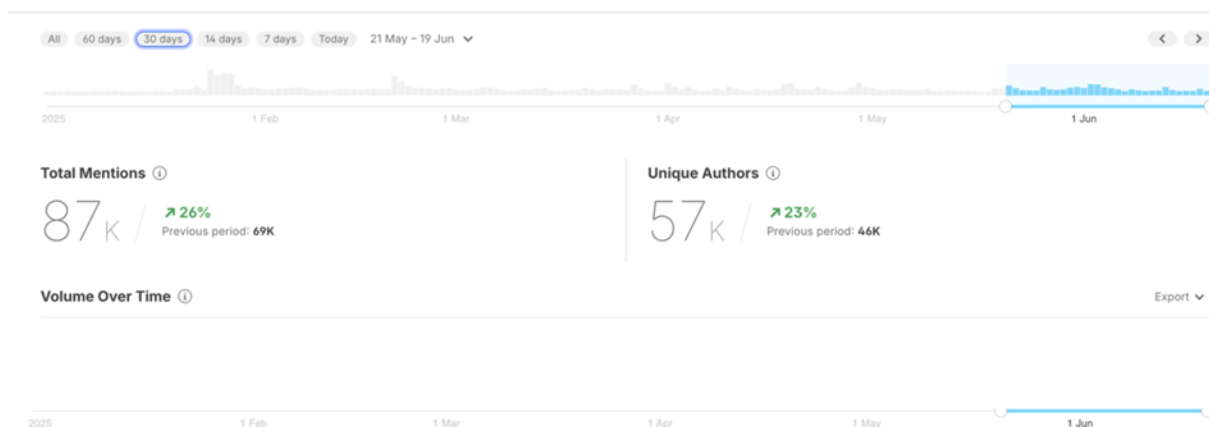


Figure 5 Social Media Frequency: #BoycottTarget

Google Trends data looking at the period immediately before and after the start of Pride Month on June 1st suggests significant online search increases related to both items, which correlates to increases social media posts related to #loveisuniversal and #BoycottTarget.

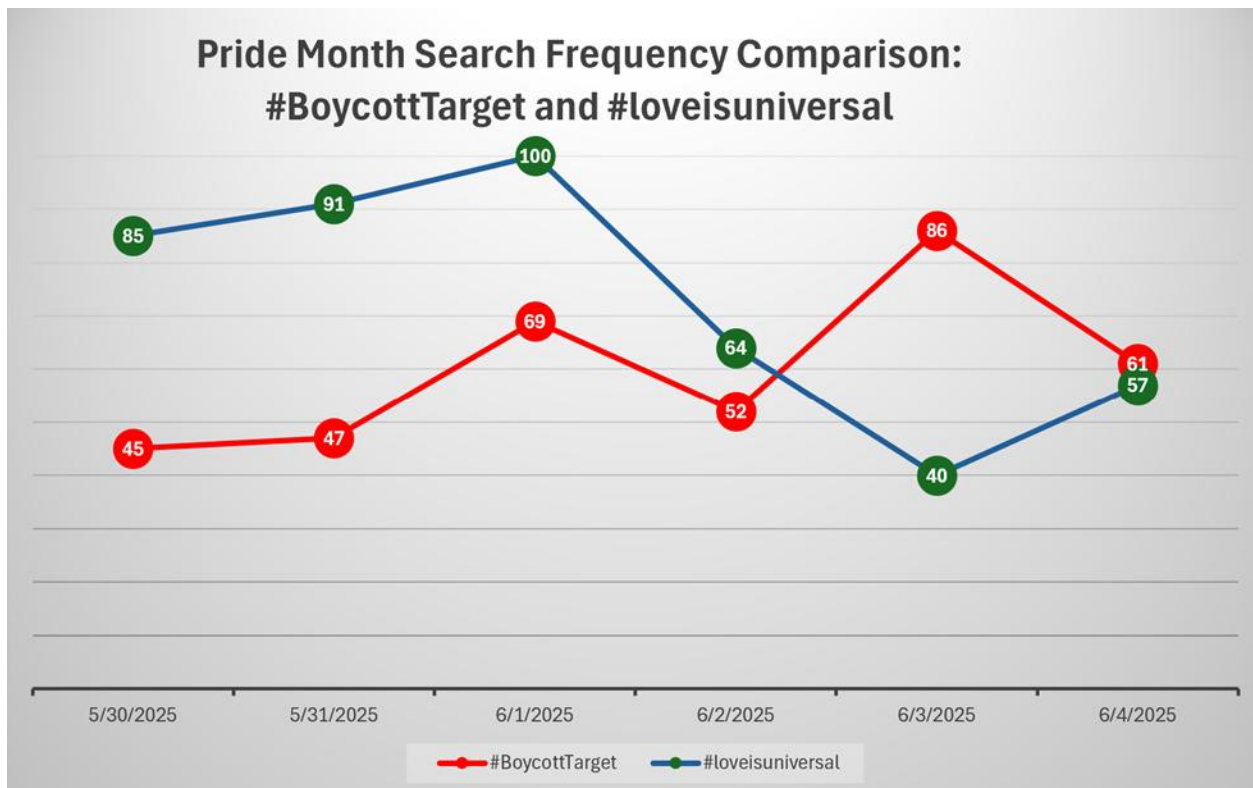


Figure 6 Google Search Activity

Overall, both the social media performance and search activity generated for both hashtags seem to reflect broader online visibility of the instances reviewed for this study. It is noteworthy that #BoycottTarget generated nearly five times the total number of posts meaning that the social media space disproportionately viewed and engaged with content expressing negative sentiment towards Target.

DISCUSSION

Based on the collected data, it would appear that social media sentiment was more favorable to a company like Universal maintaining its commitment to Pride Month and more negative towards Target for rolling back LGBTQ+ support as part of their brand. Social media content tends to drive purchase intent (Hussain et al., 2022) and indications are that may be reflected in the results identified in this study. The #BoycottTarget campaign contributed to a worse than expected 3% decrease in sales for 2025 with boycotts from diversity and inclusion advocacy groups contributing to this result (Tounsel, 2025). Universal's theme park division, however, is projected to see a significant attendance increase for 2025, based on current reporting (Mitchell, 2025).

While it would be presumptuous to suggest that the company's #loveisuniversal Pride campaign will contribute to this increase, minimally this study indicates that any feared backlash will be minimal and, in no way, hinder company success. Target, in contrast, likely thought reducing inclusion in company branding would appeal to a broader set of consumers. Based on both social media sentiment and financial performance, it appears that the presumed untapped market of "anti-woke" consumers was potentially overstated.

It should be noted that this study is not intended to produce widely generalizable results. As Liaukonyte et al. (2024) note, organizational position and the circumstances of public backlash to diversity and inclusion advocacy are idiosyncratic. The positions/expectations of mass market beer versus big box retail versus arts/entertainment tend to be distinct with similarly distinct required approaches to stakeholder management. That said, the results identified here suggest the truthfulness, persistence, commitment, and congruence noted by Lee's (2024) analysis of corporate social advocacy are present in this analysis, as well. Veering from an established position to chase the perceived popularity of an altered position may fail to bring in new customers and may make a segment of current customers feel unwelcome. Committed consistency, even in the face of risk, appears to potentially augment the value of a company or brand.

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