DISQO | DO THE WERQ

LGBTQ+ Advertising:
From Boldness to Backlash

Consumer insights on "boycotts" and "wokeness"

Countless conversations...
vexing vocabulary

In recent months, the tenor of public discourse on LGBTQ+ issues in the U.S. has heated significantly. Whether considering the legislative battles over transgender rights in several states, the sometimes violent protests at this year's Pride events, or the Supreme Court's recent ruling that businesses may refuse services to LGBTQ+ people, brand allyship and support for the LGBTQ+ community has become a much dicier issue than it has been in the last decade.

Peaking in these ongoing debates are two relatively overused and poorly understood terms: "boycotting" and "wokeness." New customer experience insights from Do The WeRQ and DISQO make the case that brand affiliation with these terms deserves exploration. In this report, we'll dive into what over 10,000 U.S. consumers think about these hot-button terms within the context of brands' support for the LGBTQ+ community and DE&I more generally. We also present insightful points of view from people working in creativity on behalf of brands at Omnicom Group.

> **These CX insights demonstrate that we need to play the long game. Today's division means that challenging moments are magnified x100, but they're often over in an instant because media moves faster than ever. Real wins come by driving lasting financial and societal outcomes.**
>
> Ro Kalonaros
> **GLOBAL DIRECTOR, GROWTH & EXPERIENCE**
> **Omnicom**

Today's lexicon

Boycotting

For brands proudly supporting the LGBTQ+ community, being protested or even boycotted is now a top-of-mind concern. Brands like Bud Light, Target, Disney, Lego, and North Face have all received backlash from vocal consumer segments and politicians due to their support for Pride or LGBTQ+ rights more generally. These backlashes have resulted in consumer groups stating that they will boycott brands until they change their positions. Despite this, Interpride (an association representing more than 275 Pride groups globally) reported that sponsorship dollars for Pride were up 20% or more this year.

For brands, there are critical questions to be considered. What does boycotting actually mean to the average U.S. consumer? When aggrieved by a brand's position on social issues, how much of the boycotting actually involves refraining from purchases versus other actions, like making social media comments? How long do boycotts typically last? Does backtracking on issues make a boycott more or less likely, or worse in severity?

Wokeness

"Wokeness" is tossed around in many discussions about LGBTQ+ rights. The term's origins trace back to describing an awakening about the unequal treatment of minority groups in the U.S., but today it seems that more voices use the word disparagingly about culture and brands going too far in support of what they consider to be liberal issues. Woke is now a polarized term, spurring conflicting consumer reactions when used.

We wanted to know what the average consumer thinks about the term wokeness. Is it overused and losing meaning? Or, should it remain in the zeitgeist to focus attention to equality and social justice issues? From a customer experience (CX) perspective, what are the implications for brands perceived as woke?

Backtracking on social issues is risky business

Some of Adland's most high-profile stories this year have been about big brands pulling back LGBTQ+ support after receiving backlash, at least in their messaging.

For example, Bud Light came under scrutiny for its work with transgender influencer Dylan Mulvaney. After calls for boycotting and slumping sales, some Bud Light marketers took a leave of absence, and the company said that it would refocus its marketing on sports and music. LGBTQ+ supporters accused the company of bending to bigoted views, while many non-supporters remained upset that the brand took a pro-LGBTQ+ tone in the first place. The longevity of this crisis for one of America's most venerable brands depends on innumerable variables in today's divided culture that are well beyond the control of any one company or brand.

Do the WeRQ wanted to know:
When a brand backtracks support for a social cause you believe in, what do you do?

- Immediately stop buying/using, and tell people in my social circles that I don't support it
- Immediately stop buying/using, but keep my thoughts about the brand to myself
- Continue buying/using for now, but look for other brands more supportive of my cause
- Continue buying/using, with brand support relatively unchanged

20% **23%**

22% **35%**
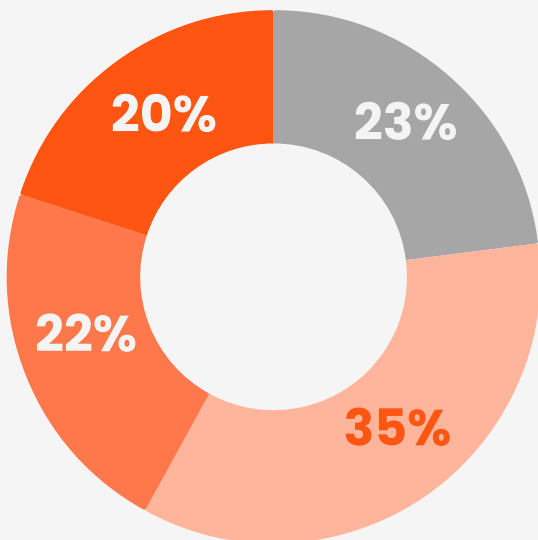
> **Start with being intimately familiar with your clients' values, mission, and vision. When aligned to doing good in the world, it's rarely tough to push back when the direction you get is in opposition. As marketers, we have to take on what clients stand for in the work we do and challenge them to do the same consistently.**

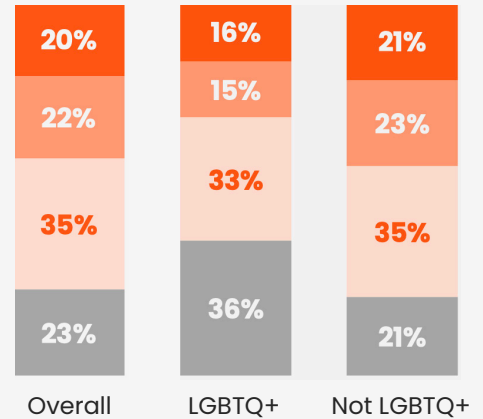Nic Climer
CREATIVE DIRECTOR

RAPP

Surprisingly, backtracking may be less impactful among LGBTQ+ consumers?

Almost one-quarter (23%) of U.S. adults say that they would stick with a brand after it backtracks support for an issue they care about. Why would they do that? The answer is complicated, but one reason may be that certain minority groups are already skeptical about brand commitments. This reasoning is supported by our data.

Reaction if a brand backtracks on support for a valued social issue

- ● Immediately stop buying/using, and tell people in my social circles that I don't support it
- ● Immediately stop buying/ using, but keep my thoughts about the brand to myself
- ● Continue buying/using for now, but look for other brands more supportive of my cause
- ● Continue buying/using, with brand support relatively unchanged

What would you do if a brand that you buy/use were to (1) voice support for a cause you believe in and (2) later backtrack its support due to other people's feedback?

	Overall	LGBTQ+	Not LGBTQ+
Immediately stop, tell people	20%	16%	21%
Immediately stop, keep to myself	22%	15%	23%
Continue for now, look for others	35%	33%	35%
Continue, unchanged	23%	36%	21%

The proportion of consumers who might stick with a backtracking brand is highest among LGBTQ+ individuals (36%, +13 points vs. overall), perhaps because they've learned to expect or at least tolerate token support. Although they may be outraged about backtracking, LGBTQ+ individuals may already see that expressions of support are limited to certain convenient moments, like rainbow washing in June. Thus, they may simply shrug off backtracking as another example of inauthentic allyship. LGBTQ+ people may also have limited alternative brand allies to consider. Who could they switch to in today's environment where other brands are afraid, unwilling, or unable to speak out support of LGBTQ+ issues.

> **Brands can't just hang a Pride flag in June and claim to be diverse and DE&I focused. Brands must decide where they stand: observer, ally, advocate, or activist. Make it super clear and stick to it.**

Nic Climer
CREATIVE DIRECTOR

RAPP

Boycotting is common and deemed acceptable by most consumers

We've been talking about the risks for brands in taking a position on social issues as well as the multiplying risks if they walk these positions back when challenged. Implicit in these conversations about risk is the assumption that consumers may choose to boycott the brand when they take offense one way or the other.

Do the WeRQ wanted to know:
"What do consumers actually do when they boycott a brand?

55%
have boycotted a brand

Fifty-five percent (55%) of consumers say they have boycotted a brand because they disagreed with its position on a social issue. When a brand, their employees, or their leaders do something particularly out-of-touch with a person's values, there's a good chance that it could impact the brands sales and revenues. Even though LGBTQ+ consumers said they were less likely to boycott based on backtracking on an issue, 80% say that they actually have boycotted in general, which is +25 points above the overall population.
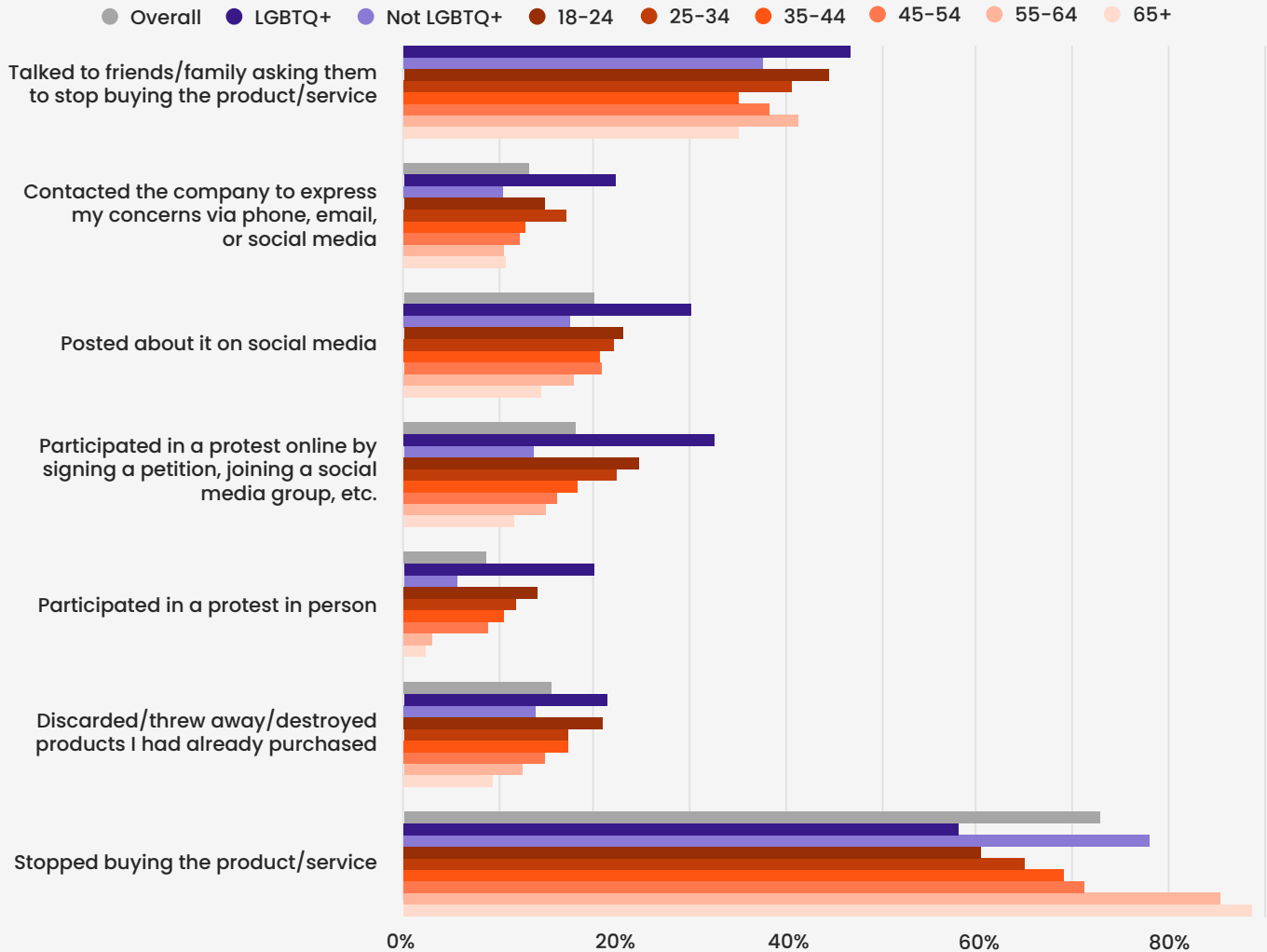
70%
think boycotts are appropriate

Most consumers - even those who have never boycotted a brand - agree that boycotts are a valid way to express consumer feedback. Seventy percent (70%) think this is appropriate if the circumstances dictate it. Eighty-five percent (85%) of LGBTQ+ consumers feel the same. It follows that most people are willing to boycott companies in specific circumstances, especially if the brand touches on social issues that are central to their personal beliefs.

Boycott behaviors vary by generation and LGBTQ+ identity

Boycotting behaviors diverge across different age groups and by self-identification as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. Actions go well beyond refraining from purchases, and extend into various social actions that can drive longer-term brand impacts.

Boycotting actions taken against brands

Legend: Overall, LGBTQ+, Not LGBTQ+, 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65+

Categories (top to bottom):
- Talked to friends/family asking them to stop buying the product/service
- Contacted the company to express my concerns via phone, email, or social media
- Posted about it on social media
- Participated in a protest online by signing a petition, joining a social media group, etc.
- Participated in a protest in person
- Discarded/threw away/destroyed products I had already purchased
- Stopped buying the product/service

X-axis: 0% to 80%+

When you have participated in a brand/company boycott in the past, what actions did you take? Select all that apply.

Older consumers who have boycotted a brand are very likely to simply stop buying the product or service without taking any further action. Younger and LGBTQ+ consumers are likely to take additional steps like discarding the products they already own, recommending boycotts to their social circles, posting about it on social media, and contacting the company to complain. Brands should be highly sensitive to these secondary actions as the long-term consequences can be even more pronounced than the short-term revenue impacts.

"I have boycotted a brand" vs **"I haven't boycotted a brand yet"**

47% NEVER RETURNED NO MATTER WHAT	**20%** WOULD NEVER RETURN NO MATTER WHAT
29% BOYCOTTED UNTIL THE COMPANY CHANGED ITS POSITION	**27%** WOULD BOYCOTT UNTIL THE COMPANY CHANGED ITS POSITION
13% COOLED OFF AND RETURNED TO THE BRAND FAIRLY QUICKLY	**36%** WOULD COOL OFF AND RETURN THE BRAND FAIRLY QUICKLY
11% BOYCOTTED FOR A SHORT PERIOD OF TIME TO 'SEND A MESSAGE'	**17%** WOULD BOYCOTT FOR A SHORT PERIOD OF TIME TO 'SEND A MESSAGE'

When have you participated or would you participate in a boycott on a brand because of their position on social issues?

47% of boycotters never return;
29% only do so after messaging changes

"I have boycotted a brand"

Of consumers who have participated in a boycott, 47% reported that they never returned to the product or service again. Of those who eventually returned, about 60% boycotted until the brand changed its position on the social issue at play, while the other 40% either cooled off or returned after they felt their message was effectively delivered.

Interestingly, older consumers are most likely to never return to a boycotted brand, suggesting that they are uniquely willing to forego a given product or service in support of their social or political beliefs.

"I haven't boycotted a brand yet"

Those who have never boycotted a company before may be the staunchest brand or product loyalists. Only 36% said they would never return to a brand if and when they did participate in a boycott.

They were much more likely than those who have boycotted to say they would cool off and return to the brand, or simply withhold their business for a set time period to send a message.

"Wokeness" is well-known but quickly losing meaning

What does wokeness mean?

About 70% of consumers are familiar with the term woke. Most associate it with a range of social issues, including LGBTQ+ rights (58%), Black rights (53%), and ethnic minority rights more generally (52%). Smaller but still large percentages of consumers also associate it with women's rights/health issues (43%) and transgender rights (40%).

Consumer associations with wokeness for civil rights

58%
LGBTQ+ PEOPLE

40%
TRANSGENDER PEOPLE ONLY

52%
WOMEN'S RIGHTS/ HEALTH ISSUES

43%
ETHNIC MINORITIES

53%
BLACK PEOPLE

When you think about 'woke' or 'wokeness' what issues do you associate with it? Select all that apply.

What do consumers think about wokeness?

Forty percent (40%) of consumers say they never liked the term, but this is much higher among older adults (Boomers & Silent, 50-60%) and non-LGBTQ+ adults (45%). Thirty percent (30%) of consumers say the term has never been useful, and 38% believe the term has been hijacked.
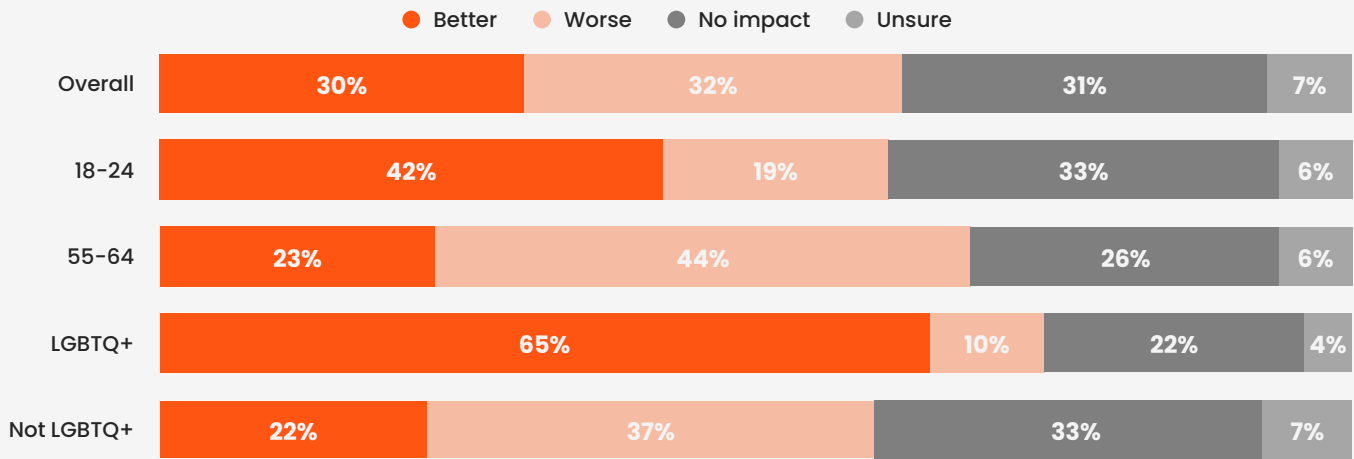
Only 22% of consumers say they believe the term remains an important slogan in advocating for social justice issues, but this sentiment is much stronger among GenZers (32%) and LGBTQ+ adults (33%). Importantly, 52% of LGBTQ+ identifying people said they like the term woke.

Diverse perception about woke companies

When asked what they feel when a company is described as woke, about one-third (31%) say it doesn't impact their opinion, another third (30%) think more highly of the company, and the last third (32%) think less. Only a small subset (7%) are unsure. As you'll see below, these proportions vary substantially by generation and self-identification as LGBTQ+.

Impact of wokeness on opinion of brand

● Better ● Worse ● No impact ● Unsure

	Better	Worse	No impact	Unsure
Overall	30%	32%	31%	7%
18-24	42%	19%	33%	6%
55-64	23%	44%	26%	6%
LGBTQ+	65%	10%	22%	4%
Not LGBTQ+	22%	37%	33%	7%

If a company/brand is described as "woke" how does this impact your opinion?

Think more highly of woke brands

OVERALL

30%

LGBTQ+
65%

GEN ZERS
42%

Think less highly of woke brands

OVERALL

32%

BOOMERS
44%

NOT LGBTQ+
37%

Brand influence and responsibility

Most consumers believe that brands can impact LGBTQ+ equality. While this percentage drops when considering brands' ability to drive politics, a large majority are bullish on the influence companies can have on both social and political outcomes.

70%
BRANDS CAN IMPACT LGBTQ+ PERCEPTIONS IN SOCIETY
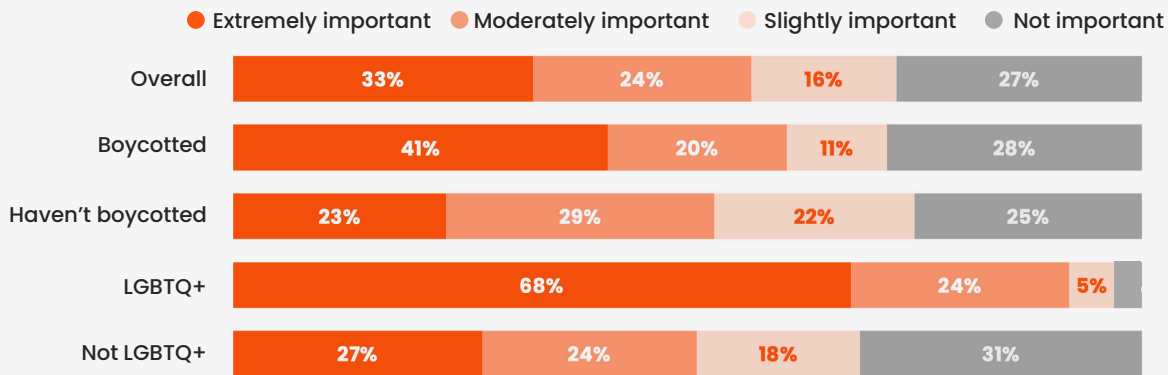
62%
BRANDS CAN IMPACT LGBTQ+ POLITICAL DECISIONS

20+
POINTS HIGHER FOR LGBTQ+ ADULTS (92%, 85% RESPECTIVELY)

## Social responsibility to LGBTQ+ people

Because the perceived influence of brands is so strong, consumers also think these companies can and should play an active role in protecting LGBTQ+ individuals from discrimination.

Importance of brands protecting LGBTQ+ community from discrimination

● Extremely important ● Moderately important ● Slightly important ● Not important

	Extremely important	Moderately important	Slightly important	Not important
Overall	33%	24%	16%	27%
Boycotted	41%	20%	11%	28%
Haven't boycotted	23%	29%	22%	25%
LGBTQ+	68%	24%	5%	
Not LGBTQ+	27%	24%	18%	31%

How important do you think it is that brands be actively involved in protecting the LGBTQ+ community from discrimination?

Seventy-five percent (75%) of people think it's important for brands to prevent LGBTQ+ people from discrimination, and about 33% think it's extremely important. For LGBTQ+ consumers, these numbers increase to 97% (important) and 68% (extremely important). For LGBTQ+ brand allies, messages and actions showing active positive engagement with the community may be especially impactful in driving desired brand outcomes. Brands should test their messaging and creatives with LGBTQ+ consumers in advance of going to market.
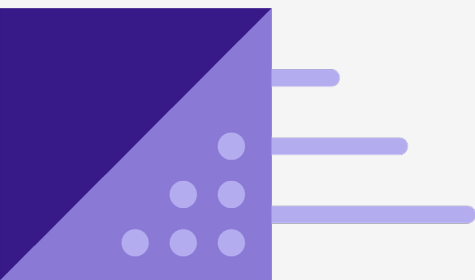
Questionable authenticity

With social attitudes increasingly polarized, there's potential fatigue and cynicism undermining brands' LGBTQ+ commitments. Do The WeRQ wanted to explore this, and we examined data points from our 2023 survey against identical questions asked last year. We uncovered critical insights about consumer sentiment and LGBTQ+ advocacy.

Where are brands outside of Pride month?

Compared to last year's survey (June 2022), this year's survey (May 2023) shows a drastic difference in recall of LGBTQ+ representation in advertising. In June 2022, almost 50% of consumers reported seeing or hearing a LGBTQ+ focused ad during the past week. In May 2023, only 27% of people said the same.

LGBTQ+ ads are not sufficiently prioritized outside of June. This drives a 23-point divide in general consumers' reported exposure to inclusive ads. Even among LGBTQ+ people, we see a 12-point difference between the two waves. This suggests that inconsistent marketing toward the LGBTQ+ community is noticeable, which may drive perceptions of inauthenticity.

LGBTQ+ ads feel less authentic than before

Compared to last year, our most recent set of survey results show that perceptions of authenticity for LGBTQ+ ads are down sharply. For the statement "Ads with or about LGBTQ+ people feel authentic," we see an 11-point drop in agreement YoY and a 7-point increase in disagreement.

Interestingly, these YoY changes are driven by non-LGBTQ+ audiences. If these "straight" audiences are primarily exposed to LGBTQ+ inclusive ads for only 30 days a year, this calls out a major opportunity for brands to better normalize inclusion.

"Advertisements with or about LGBTQ+ people feel authentic"

YoY Change: 2023 vs. 2022 ● Overall ● LGBTQ+ ● Not LGBTQ+
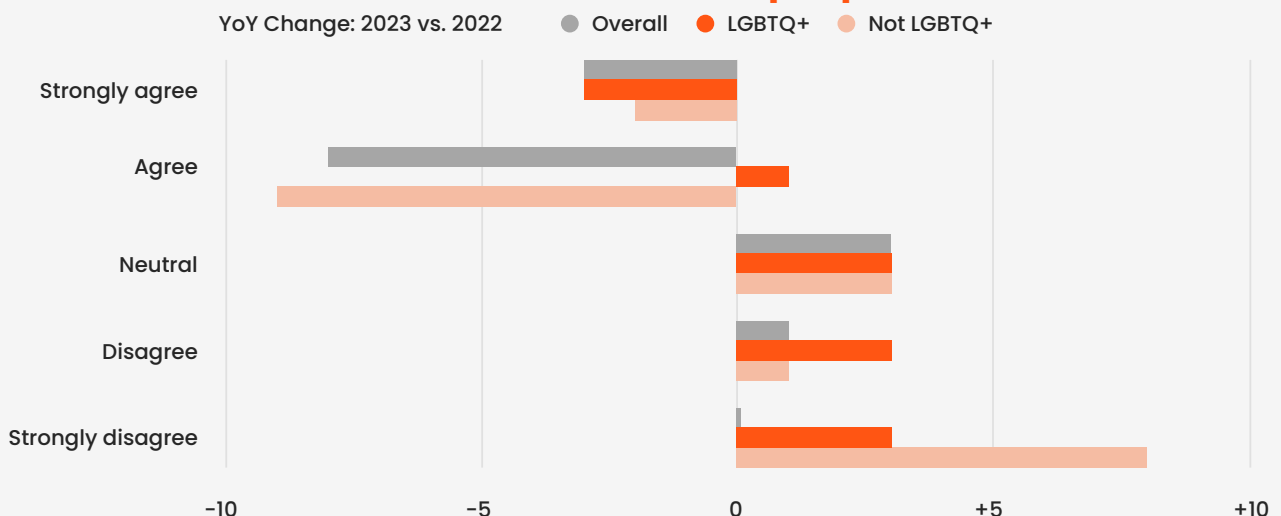
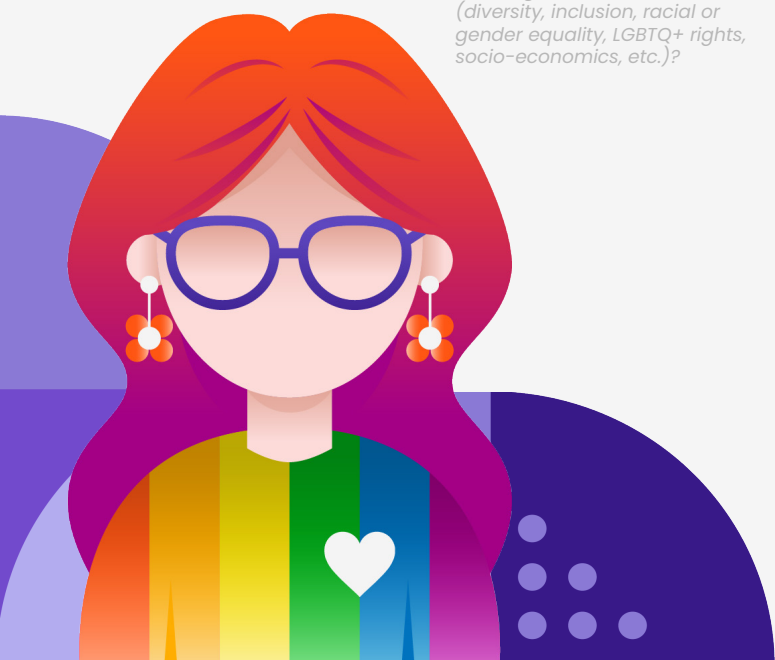# Social issues, especially LGBTQ+ topics, remain challenging for brands

With perceptions of authenticity and representation dropping, there is an increasingly higher bar for brands looking to appeal to the LGBTQ+ community through their marketing and communications. Consumers are skeptical of brands discussing issues for positive PR and are showing fatigue for corporate communications around cultural issues. In fact, when we looked at the desire consumers have for brands' involvement in social issues, we saw a YoY drop.
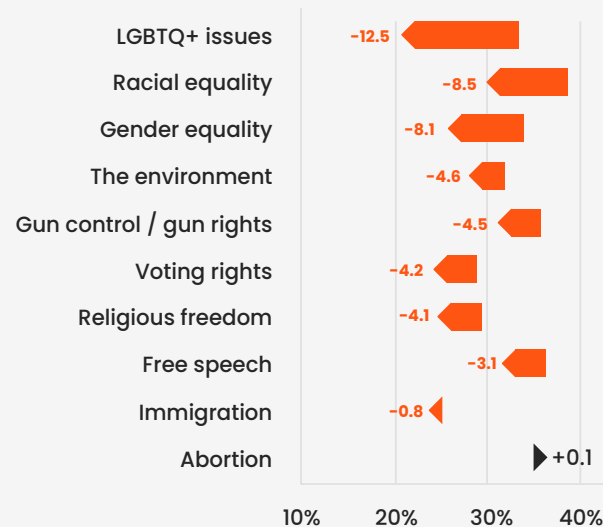
This trend is most notable among older consumers who tend to prefer brands stay out of social issues, but concerningly we also saw YoY declines among younger people, LGBTQ+, and highly-educated consumers.

We also learned that support for brands speaking out on LGBTQ+ issues lost the most ground versus all other issues. However, approximately 1/3 of consumers supported brand involvement in LGBTQ+ issues last year, and still roughly 1/5 supported it this year. We note again that this year's study was in May when most consumers are not hearing from brands about LGBTQ+, whereas last year we asked during Pride.

Desire for brands' involvement in social issues
YoY Change: 2023 vs. 2022

Yes we need brands to speak out	–12
Only if it's directly relevant to their brand	–5
Unsure	+6
No, they should stay out of culture wars	+11

In general, do you think that brands should get involved in social issues (diversity, inclusion, racial or gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, socio-economics, etc.)?

A brand's stance on issues is important enough to impact purchases
YoY Change: 2023 vs. 2022

Issue	Change
LGBTQ+ issues	–12.5
Racial equality	–8.5
Gender equality	–8.1
The environment	–4.6
Gun control / gun rights	–4.5
Voting rights	–4.2
Religious freedom	–4.1
Free speech	–3.1
Immigration	–0.8
Abortion	+0.1

10%   20%   30%   40%

Which issues are important enough that you would make purchase decisions based on how a brand stands on them?

You don't have to love "woke" values; you must understand their CX impact

When people became obsessed with blockchain, agencies issued crypto white papers and ideated NFT campaigns. When generative AI became the buzz, brands asked where to experiment and how they could get headlines. But as consumers have become fixated on divisive social issues, most brands and agencies say, "We don't get involved in politics."

We, the marketing industry, incessantly pat ourselves on the back for driving business with our nuanced understanding of consumers' lifestyles. But when faced with politics – one of the most universal aspects of today's American experience – our knee-jerk reaction is to evade. We understand the hesitancy.

National tension and cancel culture make our work more challenging as we struggle to honor our values, do right by others, and de-risk business. It's not easy.

But Adland has always had a massive responsibility to make sure brand development, creative ideation, and community connection align with where our consumers are going, and perhaps more importantly… to play our part in America becoming a more perfect union.

Our new insights with DISQO make the case that political culture is interwoven with purchase decisions in ways we can't ignore.

KATE WOLFF
Co-Chair, Programming & Ops
DO THE WERQ

GRAHAM NOLAN
Co-Chair, Storytelling & Partnerships
DO THE WERQ

When 55% of consumers say they've boycotted a brand because they disagreed with its position on a social issue, brand stewards must navigate this divide.

If a brand says it's deeply committed to LGBTQ+ communities, its owners must account for 80% of that community saying that they have boycotted a brand (+25 points vs general population). They must also recognize that younger and LGBTQ+ identifying people also take actions like discarding products, posting on social media, and complaining to the company when they take offense with its positions.

Despite the weaponization of "woke" against the LGBTQ+ community (and others), they must also know that 65% of LGBTQ+ people think more positively of "woke" brands.

Today, we live in a political climate that is almost exclusively about social issues, not taxes and economics. Do the WeRQ does not call for advertisers to become political entities, but we do ask for the industry to get real about how political culture is impacting our work. The data shows that evading is not an option. Retreating is even worse, alienating both sides. And do we really want to abdicate the power of purpose in our branding?

Almost every major brand that met with backlash over their LGBTQ+ support in 2023 publicly responded as though they were surprised. If our industry is going to continue marketing ourselves as the masters of nuance, we can't be shocked when important aspects of consumer experience design are disrupted by obvious human concerns.

What's jarring (but not shocking) is the drastic drop in LGBTQ+ representation within ads seen by respondents in our DISQO research study. In 2022, almost 50% of people reported seeing/hearing an ad including LGBTQ+ in the prior week; it was only 27% in 2023. This year, however, we fielded our study in May (not June) to make the point that our community is here 365 days a year, not just during Pride month.

LGBTQ+ people are the fastest growing minority group in the U.S., yet still relegated to niche, seasonal strategies. That's not good business, and it's not authentic.

We're still optimistic. We hope marketers are taking some brands' very public missteps seriously, reexamining their own CX mapping. We envision that marketers will plan for profits with our community and our allies – as we are key to their growth. We also hope that they will continue using their brands to bring more people together.
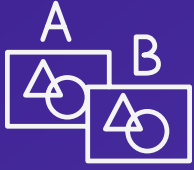
> **We must ensure that our work and the teams creating it reflect our markets and the people in them. This is the only path to stitching truth and transparency within the fabric of our work.**
>
> **Michael Danz**
> **GROUP ART SUPERVISOR**
>
> bioXlumina
> curiosity builds

Test & measure your purpose-driven campaigns with DISQO

Ad Testing

Ensure you're ahead of consumer reactions to your ads and other communications like PR with our powerful Ad Testing product. Nimbly test creative assets and messaging prior to going in-market. Evaluate which content is best, which messages provoke more or less reactivity, and if certain framings of key issues can improve your brand positioning. Tests can be built across campaigns, creative types, channels, and target audiences to confidently evaluate all necessary assets. The industry-leading speed and cost-effectiveness of DISQO Ad Testing allow you to replace guesswork with data.
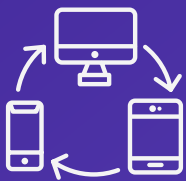
Brand Lift & Outcomes Lift

Assess the performance of your ads across channels, demographics, and over time with DISQO's Brand and Outcomes Lift products. Advertisers, agencies, and media platforms can measure both attitudinal (e.g., awareness, favorability, purchase intent) and behavioral (e.g., search, site visitation, e-commerce) campaign impacts. With client-supplied campaign flight information, we tag cross-channel exposure locations and and match them against metered digital behaviors to generate exposed and look-alike control groups. Attitudinal and behavioral differences between groups are then used to calculate advertising lift, enabling powerful conclusions about ad performance by channel, audience, and relative to competitors.

DISQO | **DO THE WERQ** — **REPORT**

Test & measure campaigns with LGBTQ+ and every other audience!

LET'S TALK

- hello@disqo.com
- Linkedin.com/company/disqo/
- Instagram.com/godisqo/