

**Unstoppable  
for 50 years:  
LGBTQ+ pride  
marches  
forward**

Photo by Elizabeth Clifton  
Kearney, Chicago

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## The absence of pride parades won't slow down a community that drives to celebrate and be celebrated—authentically on its own terms.

June 28, 2020 is the 50th Anniversary of the original New York City Christopher Street Liberation Day march, a memorial to the first full year after the Stonewall uprising and the founding of today's LGBTQ+ rights movement.

Over the past 50 years, this powerful march has been one of the most visible symbols of what has evolved into Pride Month—an annual public proclamation of collective strength the global LGBTQ+ community holds to affirm itself and demonstrate its collective power to society at large. A power which, economically, represents about 8 percent of the country's disposable income, a disproportionately large amount given LGBTQ+ individuals make up about 4.5 percent of the total US population.

This year's Pride Month falls in the shadows of two major crises—one biological, the COVID-19 pandemic, which we will address in a moment, and the other entirely man-made, the conflagration of protest and social awakening following the deaths of a succession of Black people at the hands of police. While the latter has, for Black communities across America, always been a pandemic woven into the fabric of American culture, the intersection of these more recent cases with the current health crisis (let's not forget that people of color, in particular Black people, face far greater risk of dying from COVID-19 complications) has led to a nearly unprecedented acceleration toward social change.

Queer progress over the past 75 years has come by pushing back against the injustice perpetuated by law enforcement. The Lavender Scare of the 1950s saw thousands of suspected gay and lesbians fired from their government jobs in an anti-queer purge meant to purify society against homosexuality.

Police regularly raided gay clubs and published the names of those arrested in order to punish them and ensure they would be fired the next day. Stonewall was not the first riot to push back against the systematic police oppression of the LGBTQ+ community. For a decade prior to Stonewall there were various uprisings against police brutality including the May 1959 Cooper Do-nuts riot in L.A. and July 1966 Compton's Cafeteria riot in San Francisco. These pioneers of queer rights threw their bodies against the status quo and tacit acceptance that queer people somehow didn't deserve legal equality and justice.

The struggle for human rights is an exercise in universal empowerment. Many members of the LGBTQ+ community are persons of color, but that's not the point. As long as discrimination of any individual or group of individuals is permitted, no individual is truly free. For this reason—and dozens more—we cannot celebrate Pride Month without also expressing and demonstrating solidarity with all those who oppose discrimination and bigotry in all its forms, and with all those who have taken to the streets to protect all of our freedom.

The most famous leaders of the Stonewall uprising, Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, were trans women of color who dedicated their lives to liberation for all LGBTQ+ people, especially those met with multiple forms of discrimination—including racism, sexism, ableism, and transphobia—and so, in their honor, we remember and echo the words of Micah Bazant: **“No pride for some of us without liberation for all of us.”**

Nature has also had a profound impact on Pride Month 2020.

Thanks to COVID-19, there won't be nearly as many rainbow banners flying down the middle of the streets of Manhattan or San Francisco, Portland or New Orleans, or almost anywhere else for that matter. This leaves LGBTQ+ communities without their most visible and effective platforms for communicating their power to themselves and the world.

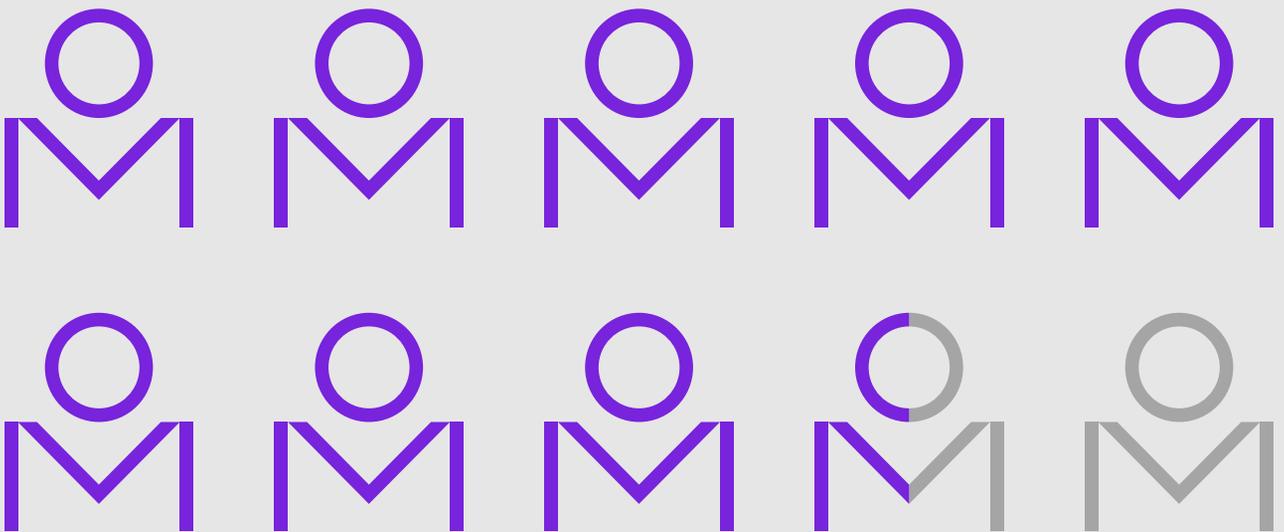
So, what happens if the movement's batteries aren't allowed to recharge with public gatherings? How does the community still publicly affirm itself in the era of social distancing? And, finally, how will these new platforms affirm the community, impact its direction, and inform its relationship with corporate America?

We asked and discovered that pandemic or no pandemic, parade or no parade, nearly nine out of 10 LGBTQ+ individuals we polled said they intend to celebrate Pride Month this year (see figure 1). This nearly total participation underlines the deeply personal meaning Pride Month holds for LGBTQ+ individuals.

For the corporate community however, the absence of local parades and other public Pride Month celebrations presents a dilemma. No longer able to write a sponsorship check or make public appearances, senior executives must find other ways to authentically acknowledge their support of and commitment to the LGBTQ+ community.

We'll look at what business leaders can do and hear more from our LGBTQ+ panel in a moment, but in the spirit of acknowledging Pride Month's historical context it may be helpful to take a deeper look at the movement as input to understanding how to authentically engage with the LGBTQ+ audience.

Figure 1  
**Nearly nine out of 10 intend to celebrate Pride Month**



Source: Kearney May 2020 survey of 250 LGBTQ+ individuals

## A brief history of unstoppable change

The LGBTQ+ rights movement has progressed at a faster pace when compared to other civil and human rights movements, though one day is one day too long to deny any individual their full human and civil rights.

True, there were 45 years between Henry Gerber's 1924 founding of The Society for Human Rights—America's oldest documented gay men's rights organization—and the Stonewall riots. But only five years after Stonewall, Kathy Kozachenko became the first openly LGBTQ+ American elected to public office when she won a seat on the Ann Arbor, Michigan, city council, and eight years later Wisconsin became the first state to outlaw discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

And the victories, legal and political, continued.

In 1993 the Department of Defense issued a directive prohibiting the use of sexual orientation as a valid criterion for rejecting Armed Forces applicants.

Three years later the US Supreme Court ruled Colorado's 2nd Amendment—which denied gays and lesbians protection against discrimination—unconstitutional.

Same-sex civil unions and registered partnerships were legalized in Vermont in 2000. In 2004, same-sex marriages were legalized in Massachusetts. 2004 also saw the first "legal"—in the sense that it was recognized in San Francisco—same-sex marriage take place.

In 2009, spurred by the relentless fight for justice and awareness that Matthew Shepard's parents undertook after his tragic death, President Barack Obama signed the Matthew Shepard Act into law, extending federal hate crime protection to crimes motivated by the victim's actual or perceived gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation.

On March 27, 2013, the second day of the US Supreme Court's deliberations on the constitutionality of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA)—a bill signed in 1996 that barred the federal government from recognizing same-sex couples, whose marriages were performed legally in individual states, preventing them from receiving any federal benefits available to married heterosexual couples—Justice Ruth Bader memorably noted that, under DOMA, there were "two kinds of marriage; the full marriage, and then this sort of skim-milk marriage." On June 26, 2013, in a 5 to 4 vote, the Court found DOMA unconstitutional.

Two years later, on Friday, June 26, 2015, it was announced that same-sex marriage would be legal in all 50 states following the 5 to 4 Supreme Court ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges*. That same weekend happened to be the scheduled Pride March in New York City and pride parades around the country, and what an outpouring of celebration it was for the LGBTQ+ community and its allies.

In June 2020, a 6 to 3 Supreme Court ruling determined that the Civil Rights Act protects gay and transgender people from workplace discrimination, a major step toward improved equality for LGBTQ+ individuals in the workplace.

LGBTQ+ advocates are quick to note that, although unquestionably much progress has been made in a relatively short period of time, there is still a significant amount of crucial work that remains to be done both in terms of their community and the society at large.

How some of this work is resolved is—quite literally—a matter of life and death. Just three days prior to the June 2020 Supreme Court ruling, the Trump administration announced the elimination of protections which prohibit discrimination in healthcare for transgender individuals.

**As long as  
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## **The formula for progress: equal parts alliance, authenticity, passion, and power**

This breadth of presence makes the movement and members of the LGBTQ+ community difficult to deny. From one-store bakers to foodservice chains, companies that take on the LGBTQ+ community, and their committed and vocal supporters, do so with legal and financial losses. They are members of every ethnicity, faith, political party, cause, and family on Earth.

We included all this history for three reasons.

First, we think these aren't things most executives have spent a lot of time thinking about.

Second, you can't really understand a movement until you know enough about it to be able to authentically address it on its own terms, to at least intellectually walk a mile in someone else's shoes.

And third, it demonstrates the LGBTQ+ movement's ability to forge unity and solidarity across acknowledged and celebrated diversity of age, education, nationality, race, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, faith or lack thereof, gender, and gender identity.

In the face of violent hostility and ongoing discrimination, the real strength of the LGBTQ+ community is its seemingly endless capacity to project a positive, united front. Pride Month provides an annual opportunity for the LGBTQ+ community and its allies to recommit to the cause and stand in solidarity with other fights for equality across civil society.

So what happens when pride's public celebrations, marches, and parades are postponed or cancelled due to a pandemic? Let's look at what our panelists told us.

# Celebrating pride and exercising power during a global pandemic

We surveyed 250 members of the LGBTQ+ community to understand how they intend to celebrate Pride Month this year. As we see in figure 2 their plans can be thought of in terms of connecting, displaying, and advocating. Even with the global pandemic, the strength of Pride Month celebrations will continue in spirit, though they may look different than the gatherings of years past.

Fifty-four percent of our respondents live in a city with a population above 700,000 and 46 percent live in cities with a population below 700,000. This threshold de-couples the experiences of those who live in more urban areas, namely the top 20 or so cities in the US, from those in smaller communities.

Figure 3 (on page 6) indicates that LGBTQ+ individuals living in larger cities are more likely to engage in Pride Month activities, with the greatest variance being in displaying and advocacy activities.

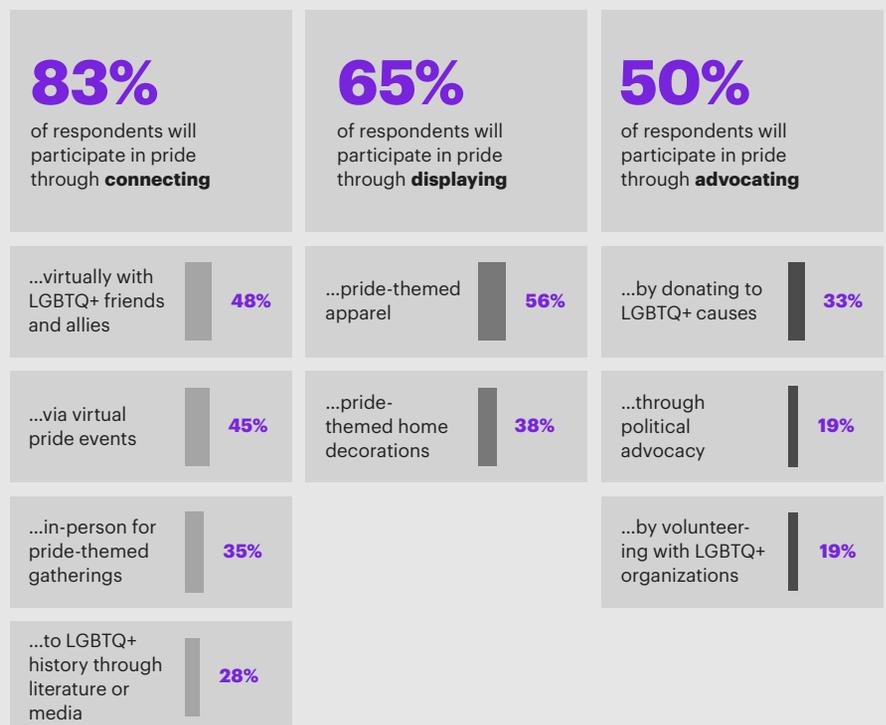
But in the end, without engagement and commitment, “months” and parades are just titles on a calendar and strings of folks wandering down a street in the same direction. To explore the emotional connection between LGBTQ+ individuals and Pride Month we asked respondents to tell us the three words that best describe what Pride Month means to them as an LGBTQ+ individual.

As we see in figure 4 (on page 7), three very human emotions—**freedom**, **love**, and **acceptance**—topped the list, followed in short order by **pride**, **happy**, and **amazing**. While some business leaders may find these words potentially ambiguous and “soft,” they would be wise to look at them as the source of positive strength for the LGBTQ+ community. Positioning brands and corporate actions in ways that exemplify these words will generate greater recognition to the community.

Figure 2  
**Many in the LGBTQ+ community will celebrate Pride Month by connecting, displaying, or advocating**

Q: Pride Month is coming up in June. With most public events and parades cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, how do you intend to celebrate Pride Month this year in June? (N=250)

- Connection
- Display of pride
- Advocacy



Source: Kearney May 2020 survey of 250 LGBTQ+ individuals

Figure 3

**Pride Month engagement is likely to be highest in larger cities**

Q: Pride Month is coming up in June. With most public events and parades cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, how do you intend to celebrate Pride Month this year in June? (N=250)

**LGBTQ+ individuals living in the ~20 largest US cities are...**



**1.7x**

more likely to decorate their homes as **displaying**



**1.6x**

more likely to celebrate via **advocating**



**1.3x**

more likely to attend virtual organized events as **connecting**

Source: Kearney May 2020 survey of 250 LGBTQ+ individuals

**One trillion reasons for taking the LGBTQ+ community more seriously**

Businesses still not sold on the importance of building bridges to the LGBTQ+ community should be aware that they are potentially jeopardizing millions—and possibly billions—of dollars.

As we noted in in our [2019 Purchasing with Pride](#) report, while approximations vary, conservative estimates suggest LGBTQ+ individuals make up about 4.5 percent of the total population of the United States, but represent about 8 percent of the country’s disposable income, or roughly \$1 trillion. And Witeck Communications estimates this figure will rise faster

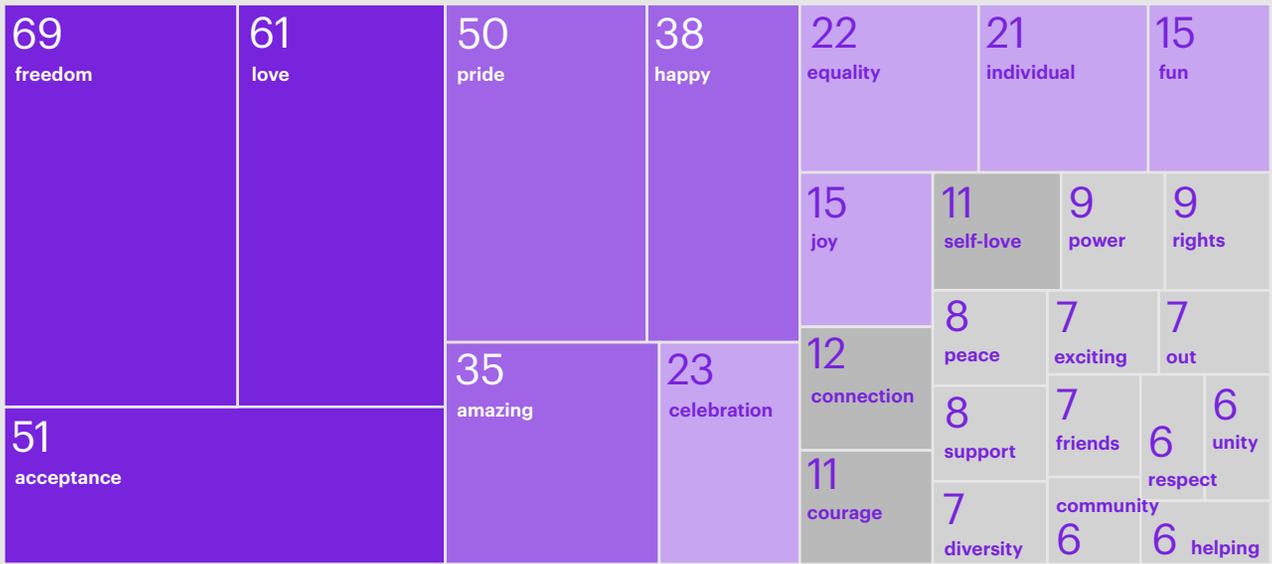
than the economy at roughly 4 percent per year for the foreseeable future. The US Census Bureau found LGBTQ+ couple households exceed non-LGBTQ+ couple households in median household income (\$92,000 vs. \$86,000), dual employment (61 percent vs. 50 percent), and percentage of households with combined incomes over \$100,000 (46 percent vs. 42 percent).

Figure 4

**Human emotions are at the heart of Pride Month meaning for most LGBTQ+ individuals**

Q: What words most describe what Pride Month means to you as an LGBTQ+ individual? (N = 250)

Responses grouped by meaning; 26 words which appear 5+ times



Source: Kearney May 2020 survey of 250 LGBTQ+ individuals

**What the LGBTQ+ community wants from corporate America**

For the LGBTQ+ community Pride Month was never about the number of attendees or sponsors at a parade, or even if there was a parade at all. It’s about authentic and respectful interaction in celebration of the legacy of the movement and individuals.

Since just cutting a sponsor check to the local or national Pride Parade committee isn’t an option this year, we believe our panel’s answers are crucial for understanding the current mood of the LGBTQ+ community and can serve as an instructional model for companies seeking to positively embrace LGBTQ+ individuals and build strategies for more effectively targeting and communicating to any common interest community.

Since we were interested in learning what companies could be doing better in terms of the LGBTQ+ audience, we asked our panelists, “What is the top way you would most like to see companies ‘sponsoring’ Pride Month this year?”

As figure 5 shows (on page 8), the LGBTQ+ community is looking for concrete benefits from the corporate world, not superficial marketing campaigns, with 65 percent most wanting companies to directly advocate for and improve the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals.

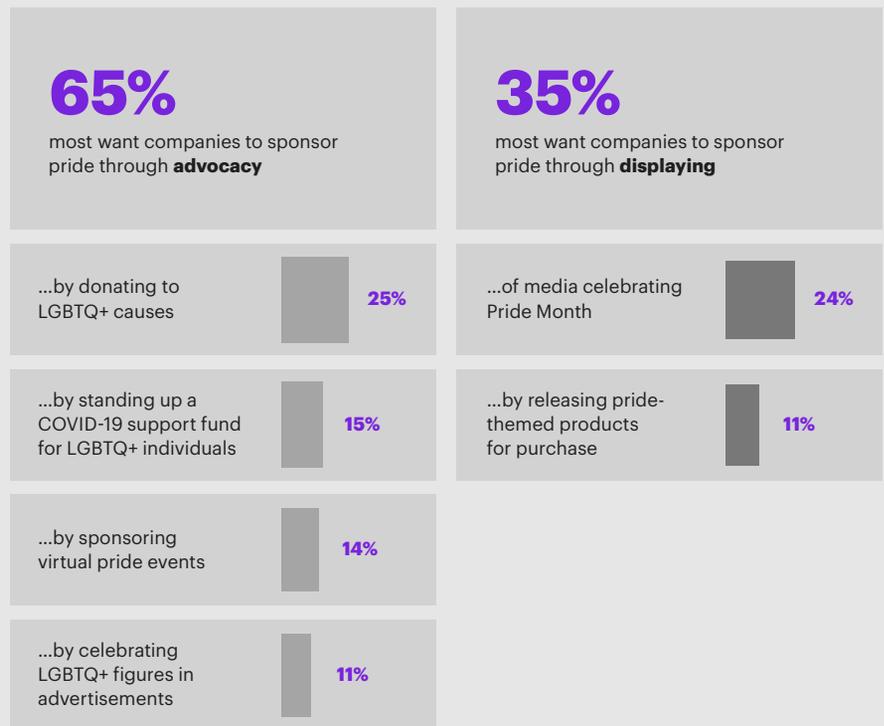
Rainbow coffee cups or advertising showing same-sex couples may be fine, but they are no substitute for fair employment laws, fully committed inclusion programs, legal victories, civil and human rights protections, or permanent changes in corporate culture or the larger social structure.

Figure 5

## The LGBTQ+ community wants concrete benefits from corporate America

Q: What is the top way you would most like to see companies taking action in “sponsoring” Pride Month this year? (N = 250)

- Display of pride
- Advocacy



Source: Kearney May 2020 survey of 250 LGBTQ+ individuals

## Move along now, there’s a lot to see here

Communities of common cause—whether the cause is rooted in race, ethnicity, values, creeds, gender, gender identity, age, or dozens of other variables—must be addressed on their own terms, authentically, intentionally, and, above all, with respect. The way the LGBTQ+ community effectively organizes and communicates with itself and the larger society provides a blueprint for marketers and advertisers genuinely interested in reaching any community with authenticity, integrity, and in the spirit of support.

In the case of the LGBTQ+ community authentic support begins with “table stakes,” such as active employee recruitment, retention, and promotion policies. But employers must continuously strive to create a truly inclusive workplace. Stop thinking of Pride Month as an “event” and familiarize yourself with other calendar dates that are important to the community, highlighted in figure 6 (on page 9).

As we noted in last year’s report, though extra efforts are typical in June in celebration of Pride Month, corporate advocacy is expected every day, 12 months a year. Trust isn’t built overnight, and the LGBTQ+ population will not immediately be drawn to brands based on a single campaign during annual pride events. Establishing and building trust with the LGBTQ+ community takes time, year after year, moment by moment. Consistent, intentional, and continuous commitment, backed up by actions and authentic concern for their quality of life, is the only way to build a lasting relationship with LGBTQ+ consumers and earn their loyalty.

Figure 6

**LGBTQ+ awareness days extend past the month of June**



Source: Kearney analysis

## Epilogue: sock it to me baby

Some companies get it.

Ahead of Pride Month, Bombas—the socially conscious online sock company that donates a pair of socks to those in need for every pair that is purchased—sent out an email to its customer list that began,

“For us **giving back to the LGBTQ+ community isn’t something that begins and ends with Pride Month. Year round, we work with The Ally Coalition** who helps us distribute socks to organizations that **directly serve the needs of LGBTQ+ homeless youth** across the US.”

The emphasis is ours. The authentic messaging is all Bombas’. The opportunity to join in supporting the LGBTQ+ community is all yours.

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