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## **| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

### **Dove's Real Beauty Campaign in India: Localizing a Global Purpose Brand**

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#### **| ABSTRACT**

The Dove Real Beauty campaign is widely regarded as a landmark in purpose-driven marketing. Globally, it sought to challenge narrow beauty ideals and position Dove as an authentic advocate of inclusivity. This paper examines how the campaign was adapted in India, where cultural pressures around fairness, thinness, and marriageability create a unique context for beauty advertising. Using both original research (interviews, panels, creative exercises) and third-party sources (academic journals, industry trade press, and media coverage), this study investigates how Indian youth interpret the campaign, whether they view Dove as authentic, and why the campaign resonated emotionally but struggled to drive purchase intent. The findings reveal generational differences in reception, highlight tensions between empowerment and commercialism, and suggest that the credibility of purpose-driven campaigns depends on aligning brand messaging with broader corporate practices.

#### **| KEYWORDS**

Dove's Real Beauty Campaign; India; Localizing a Global Purpose Brand

#### **| ARTICLE INFORMATION**

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#### **1. Introduction**

Since its launch in 2004, Dove's Real Beauty campaign has become one of the most celebrated examples of purpose-driven marketing. Created by Ogilvy & Mather, the campaign disrupted the beauty industry by featuring "real women" instead of models and by confronting unrealistic standards of attractiveness. It went on to win multiple Cannes Lions awards, an Effie Award for effectiveness, and widespread coverage in trade publications such as *Adweek* and *Campaign*. Beyond awards, the campaign has been studied in business schools and cited in academic journals as a pioneering case of brand-led cultural change.

When Dove expanded Real Beauty to India, the brand faced a more complex terrain. Here, beauty ideals are shaped not only by global media but also by cultural expectations tied to fairness, thinness, and marriageability. In response, Dove launched localized initiatives such as #StopTheBeautyTest (2021), The Beauty Report Card (2016), and Mothermonials. These campaigns sought to expose the pressure Indian women face, from school grading to matrimonial judgments, while reinforcing Dove's global self-esteem platform.

The central question guiding this paper is: How successful was Dove in adapting Real Beauty to India in a way that balanced cultural relevance, brand authenticity, and measurable business impact? By combining third-party research with original fieldwork, this study examines both the promise and the limitations of Dove's Indian campaigns.

The aim of this paper is to analyze Dove's Real Beauty campaign in India through the combination of:

1. Third-party research on the campaign and its industry impact.
2. Original research conducted through interviews, a panel discussion, and creative exercises such as storytelling and role play.

By merging these perspectives, the paper explores how young Indian consumers interpret Dove's campaign, whether they find it authentic, and how it influences brand loyalty and perceptions of inclusivity.



### **1.1 Research Summary**

#### **1. Brand Awareness & Usage**

- 15–18: Trend-driven, peer/Instagram influence; Dove recall weaker.
- 19–24: Pragmatic, dermatologist-trusted brands; Dove's past campaigns remembered.

#### **2. Emotional Impact of Dove**

- 15–18: Felt empowered and validated by authentic representation.
- 19–24: Anger at social pressures, empathy for young girls; "report card" metaphor praised.

#### **3. Inclusivity & Authenticity**

- Shared priority across groups; teens tie it to self-esteem, while young adults demand genuine execution.

Dove is seen as more genuine than competitors in addressing beauty norms.

#### **4. Perception & Loyalty Shifts**

- 15–18: 40–45% positive shift but skepticism remains.
- 19–24: 30–35% positive shift, loyalty reinforced.

Both groups value socially conscious ads but reject tokenism (specifically Dove brand using a social issue to simply sell more product).

## **2. Methodology**

The research approach was designed to capture both personal reactions and societal interpretations of beauty advertising.

- Participants: Two groups — adolescents (15–18 years) and young adults (19–24 years)
- Methods Used:
  - Individual Interviews captured personal brand preferences and first impressions.
  - Panel Discussion brought together diverse voices to compare generational perspectives.
  - Storytelling Exercise asked participants to narrate Dove's role in society.
  - Role Play Activity had participants act as brand managers to suggest campaign improvements.

- Data: Both qualitative verbatims and quantitative responses were collected, enabling thematic insights and percentage-based interpretations.

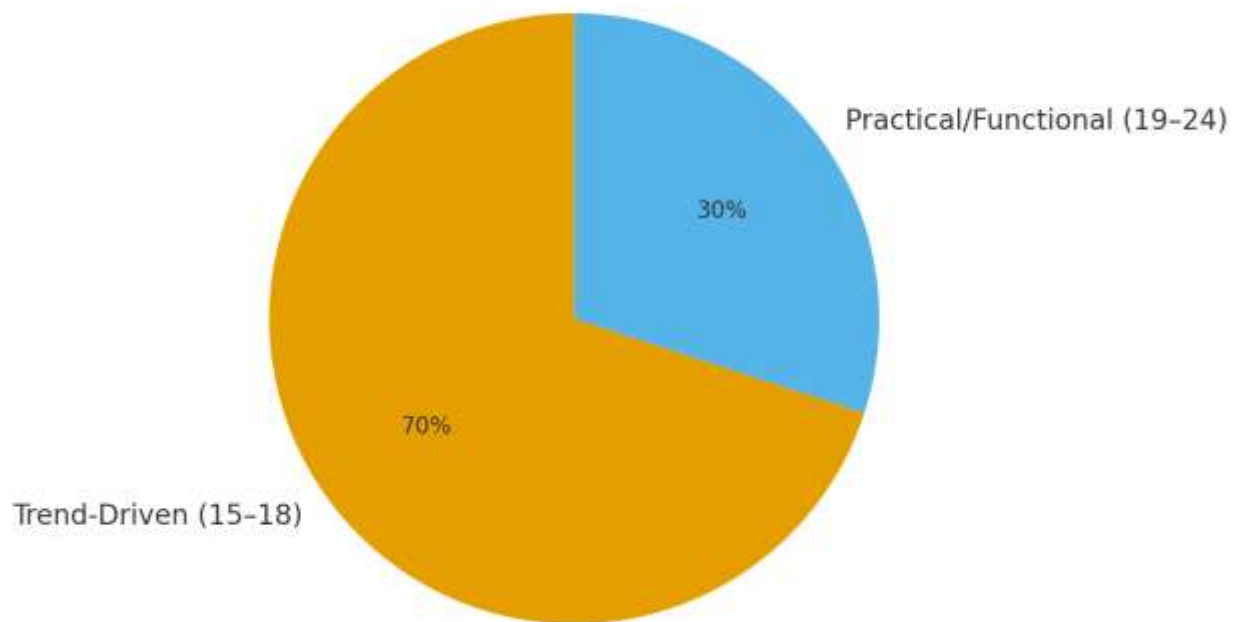
### 3. Findings & Analysis

#### 3.1 Brand Awareness and Usage

Among 15–18-year-olds, social media was a powerful driver of awareness. They cited aspirational international brands such as Laneige, COSRX, Rhode, and Neutrogena, as well as accessible Indian brands like Pond's and Himalaya. Peer influence and Instagram visibility heavily shaped preferences.

The 19–24 group demonstrated more pragmatic behavior, choosing dermatologist-approved brands like Cetaphil, La Roche-Posay, and The Ordinary. Effectiveness and reviews outweighed trendiness. Dove soaps were common in their routines, showing prior brand loyalty.

#### Brand Awareness: Trend vs. Practical Orientation



#### 3.2 Associations with Dove

The 15–18 group associated Dove with softness and trustworthiness, though brand recall was weaker compared to “viral” competitors. Some had not seen Dove ads recently.

The 19–24 group recalled earlier iconic campaigns, especially the litmus test and “glowing skin” commercials, associating Dove with mildness and reliability.

□ Pull-Quote: “The campaign identifies the problems in society that other brands don’t acknowledge — that’s what makes Dove genuine.” - 22yo F, Bangalore



*A 20-year-old female respondent recalled this older Dove "Litmus Test" ad, focused on functional benefits like pH balance. Including it illustrates the brand's trajectory from product-led advertising to purpose-driven storytelling*

### **3.3 Perceptions of Indian Beauty Advertising**

- 15–18 group: Strongly critical, calling beauty ads racist, unrealistic, and damaging to self-esteem. Fairness cream ads were cited as especially harmful.
- 19–24 group: Acknowledged similar issues but noted improvements in inclusivity. Their tone was less emotional, more analytical.

This aligns with third-party research showing that while Indian advertising has slowly shifted toward inclusivity, deeply entrenched fairness culture persists, making Dove's positioning especially disruptive.

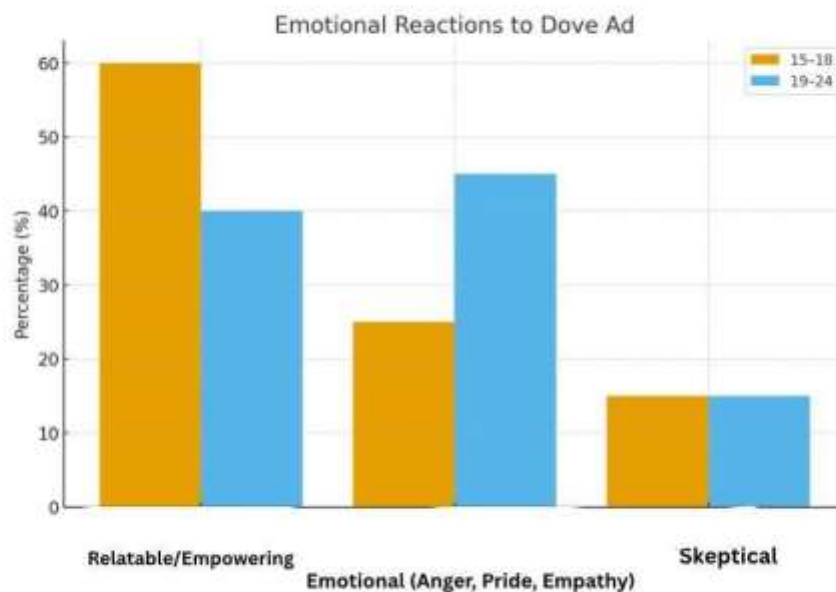


"Beauty Report Card" campaign (India, 2016) graded girls on appearance — one receiving a 5, another an 8. The metaphor, rooted in India's school culture, resonated strongly with respondents as a critique of unfair societal judgments.

### 3.4 Emotional Reactions to the Dove Campaign

Participants responded emotionally to the Dove campaign, though the nature of reactions varied across age groups.

- 15–18 group: Emotions included empowerment, pride, and relief at seeing relatable representation.  
□ "It makes people feel heard."
- "It felt authentic because the emotions and scenarios were perfectly depicted and felt pretty realistic."
- 19–24 group: Emotions leaned toward anger and frustration at social pressures, balanced by empathy for the young girls in the ad.  
□ "They're showing an extremely accurate real life scenario that young girls go through when they're growing up."  
□ "The 'report card' metaphor was simple but very effective in showing how society unfairly grades young girls on looks instead of their abilities."

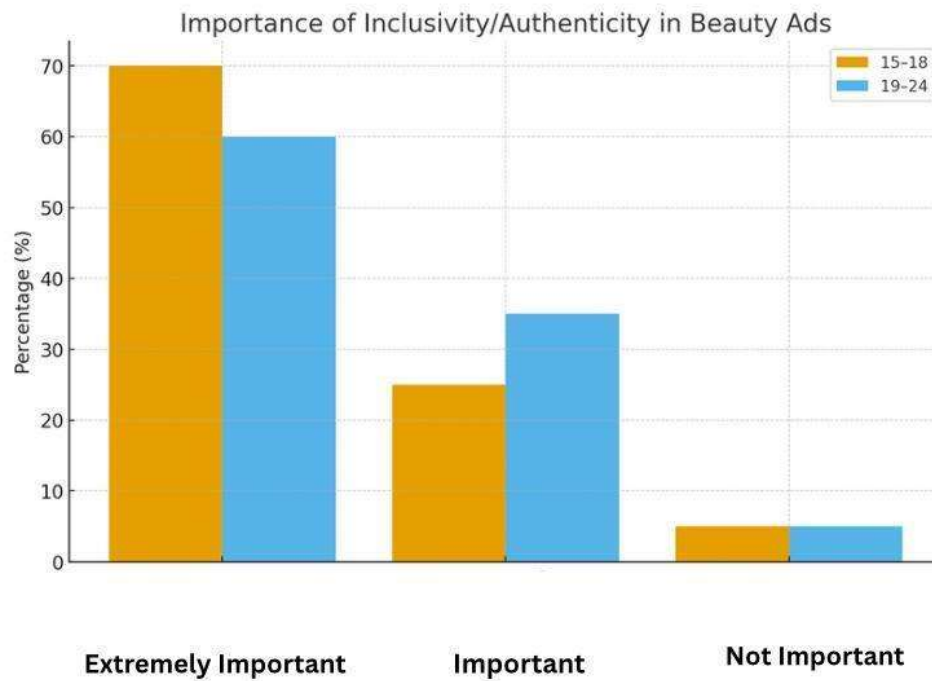


The graph illustrates generational differences in emotional response to Dove's campaign. Teens (15–18) felt empowerment, pride, and validation from relatable representation, while young adults (19–24) reacted with frustration at social pressures but empathy for younger girls. Both groups connected emotionally, though in distinct ways.

### 3.5 Importance of Inclusivity & Authenticity

Both groups highlighted inclusivity and authenticity as critical values in beauty advertising.

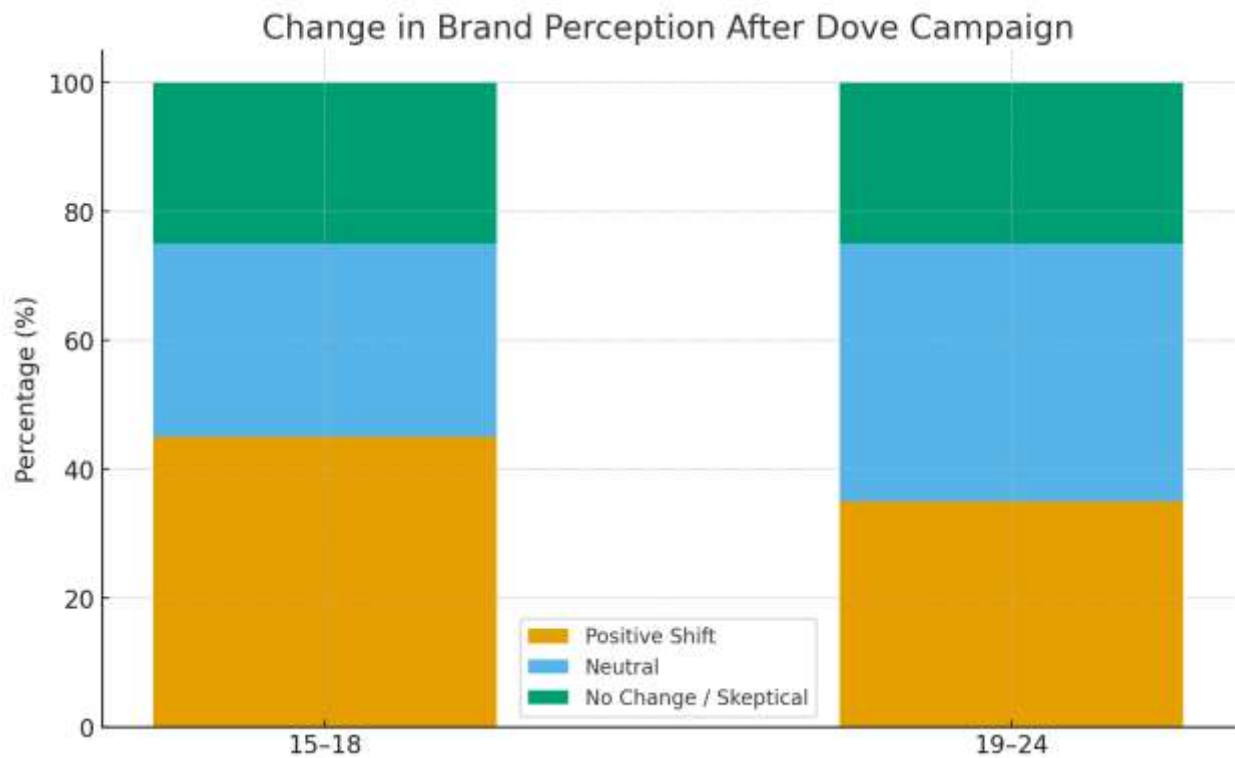
- 15–18 group: Emphasized inclusivity as essential for self-esteem during formative years.
- 19–24 group: Stressed that inclusivity must feel genuine, not tokenistic.



### **3.6 Impact on Brand Perception**

- 15–18 group: ~40–45% reported a positive shift in perception, 30% slight change, others skeptical.
- 19–24 group: 30–35% positive shift, ~40% neutral, some dismissing it as “just marketing.”

This supports Dove's stated campaign goal: its strength lies in long-term trust-building, not immediate conversions.



### 3.7 Purchase Intention and Loyalty

- 15-18 group: Mixed willingness to try Dove; many continued with familiar routines.
- 19-24 group: Greater loyalty stability; many were already Dove users, and the campaign reinforced trust. Roughly 18-20% across both groups reported higher loyalty.

### 3.8 Broader Reflections on Advertising

Participants across groups agreed that more brands should follow Dove's lead in producing socially conscious advertising. About 45% strongly agreed such campaigns normalize inclusivity. At the same time, both groups warned against tokenistic "pity marketing."

□ Pull-Quote: "They're showing an extremely accurate real life scenario that young girls go through when they're growing up."

### 3.9 Supplementary Insights

- Storytelling: A participant described Dove as genuine "for addressing societal problems other brands ignore."
- Role Play: Another, acting as a brand manager, suggested featuring "real skin, height, and weight diversity," echoing Dove's inclusivity strategy.

### 3.10 Key Insights

Generational Divide: Teens are trend-driven and emotionally reactive, while young adults are pragmatic and socially analytical.

1. Campaign Impact: Teens internalize Dove's message personally; older participants interpret it socially.
2. Long-Term Effect: Dove's true power is in building emotional trust and credibility rather than immediate conversions.

## 4. Discussion

The findings confirm what existing research highlights: Dove's Indian campaigns successfully disrupted conventional beauty narratives by focusing on authentic representation. The Beauty Report Card ad resonated strongly across groups because it reframed beauty judgments into a universally recognizable metaphor of unfair grading. Teens, in particular, reported feelings of validation, while young adults engaged in critical reflection.

However, the campaigns' impact on purchase intention (PI) remained limited. While many participants admired Dove's message, several other factors influenced their actual buying behavior:



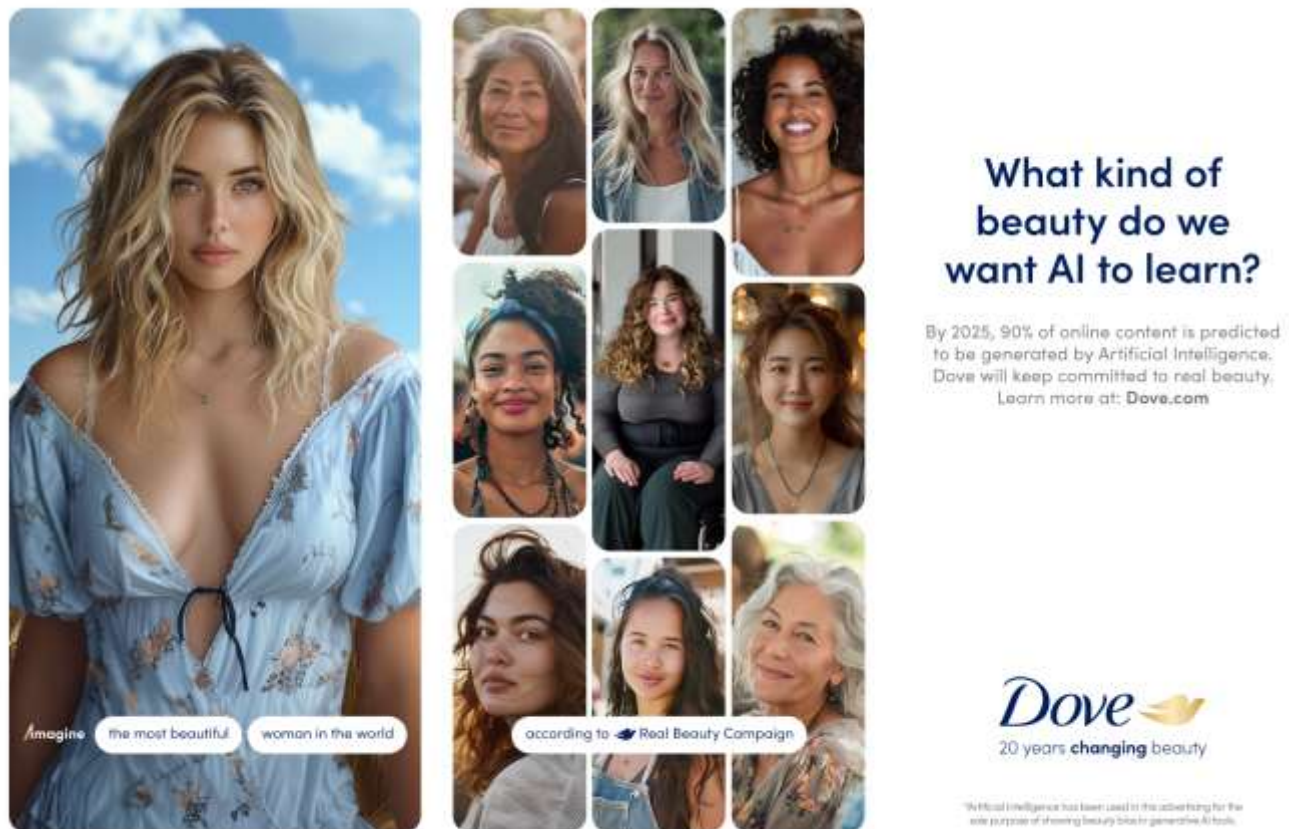
1. Category Inertia – Personal care is a habitual category. Many respondents already had established brand routines (e.g., dermatologist-trusted brands for young adults, trendy K-beauty for teens) and were reluctant to switch.
2. Perceived Functional Benefits – Purchase decisions often hinged more on product efficacy (clear skin, acne control, dermatologist approval) than on values. For some, Dove was seen as mild but not targeted enough to meet specific skincare needs.
3. Price & Accessibility – Competitors at both higher (premium international) and lower (mass-market Indian) price points drew consumers away, limiting Dove's competitive advantage.
4. Corporate Credibility – Participants noted skepticism around Unilever's broader portfolio, particularly fairness creams, which diluted Dove's inclusivity stance.
5. Tokenism Concerns – Some older respondents questioned whether Dove's campaigns were genuine or simply "cause marketing" stunts, reflecting a wider distrust of brand activism.

Together, these factors demonstrate that purpose-driven campaigns can spark emotional resonance without necessarily altering consumption patterns. For Dove, this highlights the tension between cultural impact and commercial return — a theme also noted in academic studies of purpose branding.

#### **4.1 The next chapter in Dove Real Beauty Campaign targets AI**

As Dove celebrates 20 years of Real Beauty, the brand is expanding its purpose-driven mission into new frontiers. In 2024, Dove launched an initiative focused on artificial intelligence and beauty standards, asking: "What kind of video do we want AI to learn?"

This campaign highlights a pressing issue: AI systems often draw from biased, airbrushed, and unrealistic imagery. If left unchecked, these tools could reinforce — or even amplify — harmful beauty stereotypes. By intervening at this moment, Dove positions itself not just as a challenger of past beauty norms, but as a guardian of future ones.



The advertisement features a large image of a woman with blonde hair in a blue floral dress on the left. To its right is a 3x3 grid of nine smaller images showing diverse women of various ages and ethnicities. Text on the left side of the grid reads: "Imagine the most beautiful woman in the world according to Real Beauty Campaign". On the right side, the text asks: "What kind of beauty do we want AI to learn?". Below this, it states: "By 2025, 90% of online content is predicted to be generated by Artificial Intelligence. Dove will keep committed to real beauty. Learn more at: [Dove.com](https://Dove.com)". At the bottom right is the Dove logo with the tagline "20 years changing beauty". A small disclaimer at the very bottom reads: "No facial intelligence has been used in this advertising for the sole purpose of showing beauty bias for generative AI tools."

For Dove, the future of Real Beauty lies in continuing to anticipate cultural shifts, whether in advertising, technology, or social platforms, and ensuring that inclusivity remains a standard rather than a slogan. Its long-term impact will depend on whether it can maintain authenticity while adapting to these evolving challenges.



## 5. Conclusion

Dove's Real Beauty campaign in India represents a milestone in cause marketing. By addressing entrenched cultural pressures around fairness and marriageability, the campaign reframed beauty advertising through authentic storytelling. It resonated deeply with teens and young adults, validating their experiences and sparking critical conversations across generations.

At the same time, the campaign revealed the limits of purpose-driven marketing: emotional resonance and social relevance do not automatically translate into purchase intent. Factors such as existing brand loyalties, price sensitivity, and corporate contradictions—like Unilever's ongoing promotion of fairness products—undermined Dove's commercial impact.

Ultimately, Real Beauty in India demonstrates both the potential and the pitfalls of brand activism. Its legacy lies in showing how culturally rooted storytelling can disrupt norms, but also how credibility must be consistently reinforced if purpose is to drive both trust and business outcomes.



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