

*DOVE – REAL  
BEAUTY  
CAMPAIGN*

Final Research Project Draft

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According to data gathered in 2022, 90% of women and 65% of men compare themselves to other people on social media. An issue intensified by the creation and amplification of social media but initially began well before that in mediums such as magazines, television, and print media. To combat this virulent societal standard the first ever public relations campaign targeting unrealistic visual depictions in the beauty industry Dove -the Real Beauty Campaign was enacted. This ongoing campaign first launched in 2004 beginning what later became an extensive movement and is continuing to this day. Concurrently, its overall intent to promote body positivity and end unrealistic body images within females this campaign ended up being both enormously successful and very controversial. Utilizing both communication theories and criticisms to analyze how visual interpretations affect public relations tactics and brand image through visual rhetoric.

The Real Beauty Campaign by Dove aimed to change the perception of beauty in our society by challenging beauty stereotypes and portraying a realistic image to promote body positivity. Once the campaign was released many people saw this as a revolutionary campaign for the beauty industry while others saw it as just another way for a big organization to make money instead of having the best interest of their audience at heart and investigations uncovered evidence to support this claim. The controversy that took over the internet regarding this campaign started affecting brand image and integrity. The definition of Public Relations is a strategic communication process that creates mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its public. Considering that public relations' sole purpose is to be a communicator for their organization to the public and for the public to the organization it makes sense that these professionals would need to be well-educated in the art of communication skills,

strategies, and tactics to be able to relay this information and knowledge well. Especially when it comes to controversy and combating that controversy surrounding the brand.

After conducting research many communication theories can be applied to the work of public relations but arguably the most important one that I am choosing to focus my study on is cognitive dissonance theory. Cognitive dissonance is caused by an underlying psychological conflict of inconsistent thoughts and beliefs often causing an attitude change in an effort to realign the consistency within the beliefs. One of the most important aspects of public relations is trying to get the audience to change their beliefs on a topic or organization, especially in the world of crisis communication. Crisis communication is the most common area of expertise for public relations professionals and one of the main issues they must tackle often. For example, if an organization has a crisis and its audience has now lost trust in them it is the public relations professional's job to rebuild that reputation and make the audience change the way they think and feel about that organization. This is where cognitive dissonance comes in and why it is so important for brand image. In alignment with visual rhetorical theory perception are the main underlying factor within both theories and the key to either a successful or unsuccessful campaign.

Within the Dove Real Beauty Campaign, I will be analyzing and critiquing how cognitive dissonance and visual rhetoric are portrayed when dealing with the crisis of how a body positivity campaign turned controversial by conflicting views. Overall, I will be exploring what went well during the campaign, what did not go well, why it became controversial, the communication during the controversy, how the company's public relations team responded using cognitive dissonance, to change that narrative, and why these communication tactics, theories, and critiques play a key role in conducting public relations campaigns.

The critical approaches present in the public relations campaign for Dove's Real Beauty campaign are visual rhetoric, cognitive dissonance theory, intercultural communication, and feminist critique. The focus of the critique will be placed on one of the main approaches used in public relations in connection to communication and heavily utilized throughout Dove's campaign which is cognitive dissonance theory to understand how the narrative of society was influenced. The focus will also be placed on visual rhetorical theory to interpret the images put out by Dove throughout the campaign and how those specific images enacted both a movement and an uproar.

Cognitive dissonance theory was developed by Leon Festinger in the early 1950s based on an underlying psychological conflict of inconsistent thoughts and beliefs often causing an attitude change in the effort to realign the consistency within the beliefs. "The basic premise is that discrepant cognitions create tension which the individual strives to reduce by making his cognitions more consistent. This tension is called cognitive dissonance, and the drive toward consistency is dissonance reduction. "When two or more cognitive elements are psychologically inconsistent, the dissonance is created. Dissonance is defined as psychological tension having driven characteristics" so that when dissonance arises the individual attempts to reduce it." (Chapanis 1964) One of the most important aspects of public relations is trying to get the audience to change their beliefs on a topic or organization. Dove's Real Beauty Campaign, aimed to do exactly that, change society's view on women's body images in visual advertisements within the beauty industry.

Visual Rhetorical Theory is defined as the application of knowledge that focuses on the process of translating symbolism into visual images to convey a message or communicate meaning. "Even though visual rhetoric often seems to have an automatic, obvious, or

commonsense understanding, it relies on both the design of the imagery and its audience's interpretive skills. When analyzing visual rhetoric critics focus on analyzing how people interpret and use visual rhetoric to communicate, what meanings visual rhetoric is effective at communicating, and how visual rhetoric functions in society." (Kornfield, pg. 214) When using visual elements to convey such a large and significant meaning as body image, there is an enormous room open for interpretation. Demographical, technographical, and cultural backgrounds all influence each person's different interpretation and perception of the world and how they view society. Thus, explaining why there were mixed reviews following this campaign, although Dove had a cohesive understanding of the meaning, they were attempting to communicate they did not factor in the main idea of visual rhetoric being that meaning itself is nonidentical and not cohesive to all, which in turn is the cause of dissonance in cognitive dissonance theory.

Although in an effort to make the beauty industry more realistic and inclusive, society's skinny ideals were not as easily changed as Dove had thought. This creates dissonance and as the theory states the majority will attempt to avoid dissonance causing the campaign at first to have an opposite effect and outcome than the campaign goal. "We define body-positive advertisements as those emphasizing the acceptability of one's current looks or that everyone is beautiful in some way. For example, the "Campaign for Real Beauty" (Dove, n.d.) attracted attention for its attempts to help viewers feel comfortable about their appearances. However, thin-ideal effects have proven difficult to counteract. One study showed that using "average"-size models is ineffective in assuaging body dissatisfaction" (Kraus 2018) Changing the beliefs and structural system of an entire beauty industry standard required many strategic tactics. To change

the belief, the action must also change, once the action changes the perception of the action must change causing dissonance to decrease.

Dove's Real Beauty Campaign is an example, the belief in place is that all models are perfect, skinny, fit, and have zero imperfections causing the beauty standard to become that which is perfect. In Dove's effort to change that standard and show the world that reality is not perfect and that imperfections are not only normal but can be beautiful too, they enacted action. The action was that of the visual advertisements first of its kind being released in 2004 the start of the campaign, highlighting real women, not models of all shapes, sizes, and characteristics that society had deemed "imperfect" immediately causing dissonance. The most difficult part of the campaign then followed, changing the perception of the action. "It is believed that cognitive dissonance occurs while being exposed to body-positive messages throughout public relations and advertising vehicles because they prime their audience to think about their body dissatisfaction. Audiences thereby feel a sense of guilt and discomfort in terms of accepting their bodies as these messages suggest that they should fear or be sad about the possibility that others will judge them for not being satisfied with their overall image." (Holland 2020)

Dove is continuing its efforts to change the perception and shift the dissonance down which is why the campaign itself has lasted for almost 20 years. After the initial dissonance Dove's team immediately began implementing more strategic tactics such as the confidence movement in hopes to shift this perception. Although the body positivity message was out there, that was only the beginning. Dove realized that to shift the dissonance down and change an entire perception it would have to become a massive movement that they could not do alone and over the years relating to Dove's message many other large companies such as Nike and Aerie began to implement body positivity and inclusion into their campaigns. The Unfortunate reality

is that Dove attempted to combat the most difficult cognitive dissonance throughout our entire society, personal insecurities. Changing the way people perceive themselves is the most difficult thing to do. Although the campaign has proven much success over the last 19 years and has enacted much change in society and within other companies, I believe that this dissonance will continue until normal body images are truly normalized.

The Dove Real Beauty campaign derives its original idea from the concept of perception and image. The overall goal of the campaign was to change the social standards surrounding models in the beauty and fashion industry, addressing unrealistic body images, and promoting body positivity. Within the campaign, there were a variety of objectives, strategies, and tactics to help support this goal. The tactic that got the most media and social attention was the multiple visual ads that Dove output. To discover the true perceptions behind the campaign throughout this descriptive analysis the focus will be placed on the visual rhetoric aspects.

Each print or billboard ad focuses on a strategy and slogan within the campaign, captured with each of these campaign slogans are a variety of women with many different features. Examples Include: “Real Women, Real Beauty”, Portraying women of sizes XX small – XX-large. “Face editing removes blemishes, freckles, and confidence”, here we see women with freckles, blackheads, blemishes, moles, etc.... “The Perfect Real Body” sees women with breast cups of all different sizes, small, medium, and large. “We see beauty all around us”, women from all different nationalities “Every age should feel this beautiful” showing women aged from 20-65. women with grey hair, curly hair, straight hair, long hair, short hair, and highlighted women with no hair at all, and The strategy behind this supported by other tactics is to normalize models with both wrinkles and smooth skin, curvy and thin, older, and younger, big breasts and small breasts, freckles, and blemishes completely unfiltered. One aspect of this campaign focuses on

word association combating offensive words to describe body types and characteristics. Multiple ads were released for this tactic, portraying images of real women (not models) next to their image giving a negative word used to describe them and changing it to a positive one. Some examples include: “Wrinkled? – Wonderful”, next to an older woman with wrinkles, “Grey? – Gorgeous”, with an older woman with grey hair, “Flat? – Flattering”, with a model who does not have curves, “Freckled? – Flawless”, with a woman who has many freckles on her face and body, “Bald? – Beautiful”, next to a woman with no hair. Another tactic during this campaign that Dove implemented was “Real Beauty Bottles” where it rebranded the body wash packaging to make the bottles all different shapes and sizes to represent the different body types of real women.

The Dove Real Beauty Campaign was first launched in 2004 as the first ever company to address body image standards and attempt to combat them. During this time brands like Victoria's Secret were at an all-time high within the beauty industry. It is common knowledge that Victoria's Secret models are held to a "skinny standard" like no other. Along with magazines being all the rage in the early 2000s before social media the stereotype of "cover girls" became yet another skinny standard to be set. The issue of women, especially young women wanting to look like models and cover girls so badly that they would do anything to get down to a size 2 or below. Not only deteriorate women's self-confidence all around the world but also becomes the cause of many young women developing eating disorders to lose weight fast. With the development of social media, editing apps, and airbrushing, beauty standards continued to increase unrealistically. Although this issue became apparent everywhere and especially in the United States, Dove was the first to speak out about this issue as a brand and attempt to make a change within the beauty community. This is still an ongoing issue today, but it has gotten better



with more brands following in the footsteps of Dove. Although beauty standards have not fully changed and are still an ongoing process which is why Dove's Real Beauty Campaign has been continuing effectively for the last 19 years with much progress, the entire beauty industry still has a long way to go.

Being the first to do anything is always a trial-and-error process which is exactly what Dove had to go through especially when attempting to change such a large, implemented idea in society, there of course was and will always be backlash and mistakes. Some of the visual ad outputs by Dove did not necessarily have the exact outcome that the company always wanted. Some tactics used were a full-blown success while others received a lot of backlashes and immediately became controversial. When an issue or topic becomes publicly talked about it is common for new things to come to light that might have been hidden especially when a topic is controversial or offensive. During the beginning of Dove's Real Beauty Campaign, the ugly truth about the companies they are associated with was quickly discovered.

“Dove’s parent company is Unilever, which is also the parent company of Axe and Fair & Lovely. These brands promote messages that are in direct contradiction to the message that Dove is attempting to promote, which is positive body image. Fair & Lovely, a popular brand marketed primarily to dark-skinned women, promotes a desire for “lighter skin”. This goes against Dove’s mission to be more accepting of all women’s beauty, by providing products that aim to make all women more alike.” (The Inquisitive Mind, 2014) Many women were very offended by this news, with the thought process as a customer of how your sister company can promote changing natural skin tone to you trying to promote not changing natural beauty. Axe geared towards men and young men has also portrayed many sexualizations of women in their ads. Clearly, this does not make a lot of sense, which led consumers to believe that the campaign

was all a hoax to make more money. Still to this day in 2023, Dove is directly associated with the same parent company Unilever and as far as my research could tell Dove never spoke out or released any statements about this information. Many stopped supporting this campaign because of this and labeled it as "fake" another big corporation exploiting women's advocacy to make more money.

Throughout the years' Dove released many other ads that the public took in an offensive way. The most prevalent example to date was in 2017 Dove released a three-second GIF of a black woman wearing a dark-colored shirt as she goes to remove the shirt it transitions into an edit of a white woman with a light-colored shirt underneath. Obviously, the public took this as very racist. The New York Times released an article covering the outrage of the ad describing it as being given that Dove is a soap company portraying washing away blackness. Consumers wondered how it managed to get through many layers of review without a single employee noticing how offensive the ad was. Dove replied to this crisis by stating that the ad intended to promote diversity and they did not realize the offense it would cause. Consumers were not pleased with the company's response either and Dove ended up losing a lot of valued customers over that ad and their inability to respond effectively.

The models portrayed in that ad also received a lot of backlash, especially the young black girl who was shamed and hated for going against her own race so she decided to speak out about the issue, stating that she had no idea that's what it was going to be: "She also says that if she had even the slightest notion about what would've happened with the images shot the day she showed up to work with Dove, she'd have said "no." She says, "I would have (un)happily walked right off set and out of the door. That is something that goes against everything I stand for." The young model went in thinking she was being given the opportunity to represent diversity,

inclusion, and natural beauty but because of the lack of transparency on Dove's end, her career and name are forever tarnished.

On another hand, many people also do support Dove in every way and believe that yes although they have made mistakes, they have also single-handedly helped change the societal standards of the entire beauty industry and continue to try to do so. "Overall, we consider Dove's Real Beauty campaign to be among the most successful marketing campaigns because it has managed to influence the emotions of consumers and create positive brand associations. Dove's campaign is based on a strong message which provides women with the opportunity to make their own choices about how they wish to approach beauty and encourages them not only to care for themselves but also for others in need who are less fortunate than themselves. This makes it quite an unusual example of marketing that contributes positively towards society by bringing attention to issues such as body image and discrimination against women." (Austin 2022) A more recent review of the overall work of the campaign stretching almost 20 years now the support of its overall message and work done within the strategies and tactics of the campaign itself.

Looking back now at the visual rhetoric of the ads alone as a contribution to the campaign and its message that there were mixed emotions 19 years ago and there continues to be controversy surrounding some of Dove's choices and associations today. The public eye has its way of intaking and perceiving information which can be very different depending on who you ask, although public opinion has a direct impact on determining how successful a campaign truly was. Measuring that means measuring both the good and the bad of any campaign, assessing scandals/backlash and how to respond, and what went well and what didn't. Uncovering the truth behind the Real Beauty Campaign showing both positive and negative aspects allow the

audience to form a more unbiased and well-rounded opinion on whether to support either Dove as a company or the message of the campaign or not.

Considering that this campaign has continued for almost twenty years, there has been a large amount of output in content over that time. Unfortunately, I was not able to analyze it all but instead touch on the key areas and images of the campaign that I believe portray the best examples of both cognitive dissonance and visual rhetoric. Within the analysis and critique of both communication theories, it was also a goal to share viewpoints on how these theories work within this campaign to influence public relations professionals. Utilizing both communication theories and criticisms to analyze how visual interpretations affect public relations tactics and brand image through visual rhetoric. Both theories and public relations heavily focus on perception, interpretation, and mutual understanding of meaning. Looking at what went well during the campaign, what did not go well, why it became controversial, the communication during the controversy, and how the company's public relations team responded using cognitive dissonance to change that narrative, allowed a clear understanding as to why these communication tactics, theories, and critiques play a key role in conducting public relations campaigns.

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