

Empowerment and Representation in the Dove “True Beauty” Campaign

Deborah A. Afolabi, Barbara J. Izquierdo, Raemani M. McKay

Albright College

Abstract

There is a rise in advertising that features women in a more realistic and body positive and inclusive light. Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign is a great example of this, however, some studies show that women feel that they are not being fully represented in their ads. We question whether the "Dove: Choose Beautiful" commercial portrays concepts of empowerment, and if those portrayals influence consumer buying habits. We will be conducting a survey and analyzing responses in order to answer this question. Our participants will consist of at least a fourth of the female undergraduate population at Albright College, since they fit within Dove's target market and the campus is very diverse. Participants will be asked questions about demographics and brand awareness, view the commercial, then provide responses related to the portrayals in the commercial, feelings of empowerment, and buying habits. We predict that females will feel more empowered after watching the commercial and will be influenced to purchase Dove products. There are limitations to this experiment, but the strengths outweigh them. There is definitely room for additional research following this experiment.

Empowerment and Representation in the Dove “True Beauty” Campaign

New trends in advertising for the beauty industry have begun to emerge. After years of stereotypical beauty standards (i.e. women being slim, wearing makeup, having curves, with long hair, etc.), there is a want for more realistic, inclusive, and positive beauty advertising. Dove’s “Real Beauty” campaign is an attempt to show more realistic and “empowering” views of women in advertising, while representing all females.

Judith Taylor and colleagues conducted a study that consisted of focus groups where they posed two questions: whether the campaign is “feminist” and if corporations should use the cause of feminism as an advertising strategy (Taylor, Johnston, & Whitehead, 2016). At first, it was noted that the respondents were happy to see “less stereotypical images of women in mainstream media” (Taylor et al., 2016). However, they were mainly distrustful of the cause of feminism as an advertising strategy because feminism is a difficult subject and it's a money scheme (Taylor et al., 2016). The participants also felt that the campaign was not really representative of all women, and were stereotypical of other feminist cause advertisements (Taylor et al., 2016). We wanted to find a commercial that represented all women. The commercial we picked was “Dove: Choose Beautiful.”

Empowerment is the “process of becoming stronger and more confident, especially in controlling one's life and claiming one's rights” (Oxford, n.d.). We believe the commercial does a good job of showing empowerment, and thus want to see if other females feel the same and will purchase Dove products due to how they feel about it. This relates to Victoria Drake’s article on empowerment in advertising, “The Impact of Female Empowerment in Advertising (Femvertising).” She explains that there has been a “shift in advertising portraying domesticated

and/or objectified females to those who are independent, confident, and liberated, thus empowered" (Drake, 2017). Dove's campaign is supposed to show this, and we wonder if women are more likely to feel empowered themselves, leading them to buy Dove products, if they see these portrayals in their advertising.

Based on this research we will be conducting a survey in order to answer our research question: Does the "Dove: Choose Beautiful" commercial portray concepts that allow women to feel empowered with themselves and do these portrayals influence consumer buying habits of Dove products?

According to usanews.com, Albright College currently has a total undergraduate enrollment of 1,912 students, split with a gender ratio of about 60 percent women to about 40 percent men. We concluded that the target market of the Real Beauty campaign is consumers that fall in the 18-35 age range, since women in these years are more conscious about what they are buying and will look for items more inclusive and match who they see themselves. However, the campaign also targets younger and older women alike. Taking all that into account, females at Albright College are ideal respondents to our study since the campus is split between 50 percent Caucasian and the other half being from other ethnic groups. For the purpose of this study, we feel that ideally, we would need at least a fourth of the total population of females on campus (1,147), which is 286 respondents. At most, we could have half of the population (573 female students) or a third of the female students (382).

We hypothesize that the concepts portrayed in the "Dove: Choose Beautiful" commercial make women feel empowered and thus, influences them to buy Dove products. The independent variable is the concepts of the commercial that include empowerment and representation. The

dependent variables are feelings of empowerment and whether or not one would purchase Dove products after watching the commercial.

Participants will receive a traditional Albright student email asking for participants.

Attached will be a link to a Google form with scaled questions and a few open-ended questions. These questions will include general demographic questions such as class, grade, gender, race, etc., questions relating to knowledge of the company and product, and questions relating to empowerment and the advertisement. The questionnaire will begin with the brand questions, then the respondents will be asked to view the commercial (linked in the survey), and the following questions will be on reactions to the advertisement and buying habits based on feelings of empowerment and the commercial. Questions regarding demographics will be at the end of the survey. There will also be questions on the content of the advertisement itself: whether the participants felt they were represented, if all types of females are represented, if the portrayals of empowerment, and acceptance of all body types, are present, etc. After participants watch the video they will answer the questions in the survey as honestly as possible. The commercial is about four minutes long. We estimate that the entire survey, both with questions and video, will take an estimate of 15-20 minutes to complete. We will be analyzing the results for any correlations with feelings of empowerment after watching the commercials and buying habits of Dove products.

We predict that after watching this video, females will feel more empowered, as well as represented and that these feelings will influence respondents to buy Dove products. We will analyze the perceptions of the commercial, noting whether respondents thought the commercial was empowering and representative of all or most females. We will analyze responses on

whether they would purchase Dove products because of the empowerment and representative portrayals of the ad.

There are strengths to this experiment. Most women must have heard of both the product and the campaign and/or use Dove products, since their advertising is very prominent. They have presence on major social media platforms (YouTube, Spotify, Snapchat, Instagram), as well as broadcast and print advertisements. Therefore, the experiment is something known to people and not something completely new. The experiment can also create awareness of the product and campaign, if there are those who don't know of it. Albright College is a good sample for the study since the campus has a large amount of females and the campus is very diverse. There are still limitations, however. Most studies of the campaign address that the ads are not very representative of all women, and we agree with that. There is a significant lack of women of color and their hair types. The "Dove: Choose Beautiful" commercial is one of the few that actually has a good representation of females. The last limitation is that of garnering respondents. We need at least a fourth of Albright's female population to respond to the survey. Even though we'll be able to send the survey out through email, social media, and word of mouth, we cannot verify whether or not we'll get the exact amount of students to respond. This experiment could be done by a focus group as well, and future experiments could include male respondents or analyzing responses to newer advertisements with the same research question.

Our survey has six sections. For each section we have a set of questions that relate to each other. These sections' questions are on product use, brand awareness, feelings of empowerment, representation, respondent buying Habits, and demographics.

The brand awareness questions begin by asking if the respondent has ever used a Dove product. Since the survey is based on Dove, asking if they ever used a Dove product would be fitting. If a respondent has not used Dove products before they skip the actual brand awareness section. If they have used Dove products, they are next asked how satisfied they were after using a Dove product. Responses range from very satisfied to very unsatisfied. The next two questions ask how long a respondent has been using Dove products and how likely they are to buy Dove products again. The length question responses range from under one year to over 12. The second question is on a scale of 1-10, so they have the option to pick how high or how low. The next question asks respondents what kind of Dove products they use. This ranges from typical hygiene items like body wash to more than one product. Then we asked if the respondents think Dove products are priced at a reasonable price. That range was either yes or no.

After this section we got into questions that really shaped what the survey was about: the Dove: Real Beauty Campaign. First we asked if the person taking the survey believed in female empowerment. That range was yes or no. We then asked if they thought Dove represented all types of women. That also was a range of yes or no. We asked the respondents about the campaign commercials, specifically if they have ever seen a Dove: Real Beauty Campaign advertisement, also a range of yes or no. The next question asked if the participants believed that the commercial they viewed was representative of different females, which ranged from yes or no, unless they had not seen a commercial before. The next question asked the respondents if they thought the Dove: Real Beauty campaign demonstrated true beauty, another yes or no question. Lastly, we finished this section up with an open-ended question asking the participants what real beauty was to them.

At the end of the Dove: Real Beauty Campaign section, participants were asked to view a campaign commercial we selected. In the video, Dove visited different cities presenting women of different shapes and sizes with options when they walked through a door. One door entrance presents the word, “Average” on top, the other “Beautiful.” In the beginning of the video many women have to stop and think for a minute before choosing a door. Many of the women chose to walk through the “Average” door. As the video progressed, women started to choose to walk through the “Beautiful” entrance. One woman who decided to go through the “Beautiful” door says that the feeling was “quite a triumphant feeling. It was like telling the world I think I’m beautiful” (RobertHoldenTV, 2018). On the other hand, a woman who went through the “Average” door said, “Am I choosing because of what's constantly bombarded at me and what I'm being told that I should accept? Or am I choosing because that's what I really believe?” (RobertHoldenTV, 2018). As the women walked through the doors they each realized that they have a choice to choose how they want to identify themselves. Many say they are going to walk through the “Beautiful” entrance next time and don’t know why they didn’t do it in the first place. Dove sets up this campaign to bring awareness to women and let them know that they should choose beautiful everytime.

The next two sections of the survey ask how the person views the quality of Dove products and feelings of empowerment after watching the commercial. The empowerment section of the survey asks respondents how empowered the commercial made them feel, from not empowered at all to somewhat empowered. That follows up with three open-ended questions asking the participants what emotions the video sparked, what they would change about the commercials, and what they liked about the commercial. Then we asked how likely a respondent

would be to use Dove products following viewing the video, leading right into the next section on consumer buying habits. The responses could range from very likely to not likely.

The section on respondent buying habits first asked respondents how likely they are to purchase a Dove product after watching the commercial. The range for this was very likely to not likely. Next we asked what influences respondents when purchasing personal hygiene products. For this question the range was quality, brand name, price, product variety, quantity, skin type, hair type, social media, and other. After this question, we extend on what categories influence the participants' buying habits. For each category we ranged it from rarely to often. Since the suvergy was directed to college students, we asked if they thought Dove products were too expensive for college students. The range was yes or no. Next, we added another open ended question about why or why not they think Dove products are too expensive for college students. The last section is basic demographic questions asking about the participants' gender, age, ethnicity, if they are a college student, and what year they are if they attend college.

Overall, hypothetically, we conclude that our data would show a positive correlation with feelings of empowerment and the Dove: Real Beauty commercial, and in part, the campaign as a whole. This is because we hypothesize that we would find that the participants would find that the commercial they viewed was representative, but most likely not other advertisements in the campaign, so not the campaign as a whole. We hypothesize that we would also find that the campaign nor the commercial we selected would influence much of the consumer buying habits. The results would be different in relation to the actual survey question sections.

For section one, Product Use, we hypothesize that we would get a mixed result of both those who use the products and those who do not. While we assume that the majority of our

participants would have at least heard of the brand, we could not do the same for product use. A skip pattern was implemented for this section, therefore those who would have selected no for product use would skip section two, Brand Awareness, and skip to section three, Dove: Real Beauty Campaign, which was intended to measure awareness of the campaign. We do not have any hypothesized results for section two, as we cannot infer how participants feel about their use of the brand or what products of the brand they use themselves.

For section three, we hypothesize what the overall responses for each question would be. We think that most participants will believe in female empowerment, however, they may not feel like Dove is representative of all types of women. We hypothesize that a good amount of women may have seen a Dove: Real Beauty Campaign commercial, but if they have, they often would not think the one they had viewed was representative of different females. We think that participants would both think the campaign demonstrates true beauty as well as it doesn't. We infer that respondents would see true beauty as inner beauty to themselves.

For section four responses, Empowerment, which measures if the commercial they viewed made the respondents feel empowered as a female, we infer that participants will feel between somewhat empowered and empowered. We hypothesize that the commercial will spark many feelings within the participants — happiness, sadness, surprise, no emotion or indifference — but that they are between likely, neutral, and not likely to use a Dove product after viewing the commercial. We could not hypothesize what the respondents would have liked about the commercial or what they would change about the commercial.

We hypothesize that participant buying habits would not be influenced greatly by the commercial. For section five, Buying Habits, we infer that participants would be between likely,

neutral, and not likely to purchase a Dove product after viewing the commercial. We infer that any one of the choices supplied in the questions regarding what influences the participants when buying personal hygiene products could be selected and what categories hold sway over their buying habits. We infer that we would get a mix of yes and no regarding if Dove products are expensive for college students. We think we would also get a mix of responses regarding whether sensitive skin is a reason for someone to purchase a Dove product. This question was meant to measure whether people may purchase Dove simply because they are known for their products since they are dermatologist recommended.

We have no hypothetical results for section six, Demographics, since we cannot infer the gender, class rank, ethnicity, or age of participants. When creating the survey, we were aiming for female respondents, since that is who the campaign is geared towards, however, we cannot exclude men completely since Dove does make products for men. We can assume that the respondents will be college students since the survey was being made available only to Albright College and it's students.

What can these results mean? After taking this survey, for some, this survey can mean that it helped them. What we mean by helping them is that they felt empowered after watching this commercial. You rarely find a commercial or brand that is meant to make women feel like they're doing something right. Once we found the Dove: Real Beauty campaign we felt this commercial could either do one of two things: make women feel empowered and want to buy Dove products or make them feel like the commercial didn't really help or it wasn't effective. The result can also mean people took the survey and enjoyed the meaning behind it.

Our results also mean that Dove commercials are not really representative, but the commercial we showed was really the only one we could find that was. Dove needs to create more commercials that make all women, and all ethnicities feel welcomed and represented. In order to reach a broader female audience, Dove needs to create more commercials like what we showed. Viewing the Dove commercial can or cannot influence consumer buying habits. It can influence buying habits if a consumer feels empowered enough to buy products but the commercial doesn't necessarily show any Dove products in the advertisement. We think they should add more product demonstrations and products in their future advertisements.

Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign is an attempt to show more realistic and "empowering" views of women in advertising, while representing all females. Our survey targeted the question: Does the "Dove: Choose Beautiful" commercial portray concepts that allow women to feel empowered with themselves and do these portrayals influence consumer buying habits of Dove products? We found that the commercial does spark feelings of empowerment and is representative although the campaign as a whole does not show as much representation. We also found that the commercial may not change consumer buying habits due to no product visual in the video. However, the empowerment portrayals may influence buying habits.

References

Albright College. (2019). The Princeton Review College Rankings & Reviews. Retrieved March 1, 2020, from

[https://www.princetonreview.com/college/albright-college-1024129?cid=best-regional#!studentbody.](https://www.princetonreview.com/college/albright-college-1024129?cid=best-regional#!studentbody)

Drake, V. (2017). The impact of female empowerment in advertising (femvertising). *Journal of Research in Marketing*, 7 (3), 593-599.

Here's what student life is like at Albright College. (n.d.). U.S. News & World Report. Retrieved March 1, 2020, from

[https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges/albright-college-3229/student-life.](https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges/albright-college-3229/student-life)

Johnston, J., Taylor, J., & Whitehead K. (2016). A corporation in feminist clothing? Young women discuss the Dove 'Real Beauty' campaign. *Critical Sociology*, 42 (1), 123-144.

Oxford. (n.d.). Empowerment. In *Lexico.com dictionary*. Retrieved March 2, 2020, from

[https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/empowerment.](https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/empowerment)

RobertHoldenTV. (2018, July 5). *Dove choose beautiful women all over the world make a choice* [Video]. YouTube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SeLI0Sgipz4.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SeLI0Sgipz4)