



Marketing to the Margins: Inclusive messaging strategies for Underrepresented and Overlooked Demographics

Rebecca O Alabi¹, Oseruona O Asak², Ogechukwu T Ibeama³, Arinze E Anaegbe⁴

¹ Department of Advertising, Public Relations, Social Media, Suffolk University, Boston, Massachusetts, United States

² Department of Public Relations and Advertising, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria

³ D'Amore-McKim School of Business, Northeastern University, Boston, MA, United States

⁴ Department of Accounting, Kingsley Ozumba Mbadiwe University, Ideato, Nigeria

Abstract

Brands today face growing pressure not only to signal diversity but also to show, in concrete ways, that they are committed to groups who have long been left out. This study looks at how inclusive messaging can engage audiences who are often ignored, paying attention to issues of race, class, disability, and age. To guide the discussion, an Inclusive Messaging Framework is proposed. The framework follows four stages across the customer journey and highlights several elements: the need for genuine representation, stories that reflect cultural awareness, products that match real market needs, and types of engagement that continue after purchase. The research design is qualitative and draws mainly on existing sources such as academic writing, professional commentary, and industry reports. A detailed case study of Fenty Beauty illustrates how the framework plays out in practice, while another campaign is used for comparison, showing different degrees of success in pursuing inclusion. The study draws evidence from indicators such as earned media value, sentiment analysis, and user-generated content. Findings show that Fenty Beauty achieved both commercial impact and cultural credibility by embedding inclusion across its marketing funnel. Although diversity was not explicitly presented as a key feature, it was consistently integrated into brand communication, product development, and audience interaction. This research enriches marketing scholarship by showing how inclusive communication can yield measurable brand outcomes, while also acknowledging the challenges of adapting such strategies across different industries.

Keywords: Inclusive marketing, underrepresented communities, messaging strategy, intersectionality, representation, brand authenticity, consumer trust

Introduction

For a large part of its development, mainstream marketing has been shaped around a rather narrow idea of the consumer, most often imagined as youthful, financially secure, physically able, and racially advantaged. Campaigns in television, print, and, more recently, digital media have tended to exclude those who do not fit this image or else present them through stereotypes that strip away complexity and reinforce social hierarchies (Campbell *et al.*, 2023) ^[10]. Many times, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, older adults, and those from lower-income backgrounds are not seen at all. At other times, when they do appear, they are reduced to oversimplified images that reflect old and persistent biases. Take the case of older adults. They are not merely absent from many brand messages but, when present, are often framed through reductive images that heighten marginalization. Research confirms that they remain consistently underrepresented and that the portrayals that do exist frequently reproduce clichés that distance them further from the cultural mainstream (Loos & Ivan, 2018) ^[25]. This neglect is especially notable when one considers that such groups form a significant share of the global population. Yet their lives, perspectives, and ambitions rarely surface within brand storytelling, leaving entire communities without genuine representation. What complicates matters further is that exclusion persists even in the digital age. While online platforms promised greater diversity of voices, algorithmic design and content

moderation practices have, at times, reinforced existing biases rather than dismantled them. For example, Facebook's ad delivery system has been shown to exclude certain groups even when targeting appears neutral (Ali *et al.*, 2019) ^[2]. Social media campaigns also reveal persistent gaps in racial and gender diversity (An & Kwak, 2019). When brands attempt inclusion, it is often superficial. Token appearances, isolated campaigns, or temporary diversity drives fall short of building sustained trust. Many consumers now doubt the sincerity of brands that present inclusion in words but fail to demonstrate it consistently across touchpoints.

Yet the demand for change is growing. Consumers increasingly expect authentic representation in marketing (Brodzik *et al.*, 2021) ^[8]. Social movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and campaigns for accessibility have raised public expectations. Younger generations, in particular, are more diverse and socially aware. They evaluate not only what a brand says, but who it includes, how it communicates, and whether it follows through. Companies can no longer treat inclusivity as optional. It has become a strategic requirement for relevance and growth (Verbytska *et al.*, 2023) ^[41]. Demographic shifts reinforce this imperative. Gen Z and Millennials are more racially diverse than previous generations and are active advocates for equity. At the same time, aging populations expand the importance of older consumers, while disability and economic inequality remain urgent global concerns. These realities create both a moral and strategic imperative: brands

that fail to authentically engage marginalized groups risk alienation and irrelevance in future markets.

This study argues that inclusive marketing, when applied with cultural competence and genuine community engagement, can drive both brand growth and social equity. However, inclusion cannot be reduced to diverse casting or surface-level messaging. It requires an intentional strategy that embeds equity across the customer journey. To address this need, the paper proposes the Inclusive Messaging Framework, a four-part model designed to guide brands in building authentic, equitable, and effective campaigns for racially, economically, physically, and generationally marginalized consumers.

Research Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study is to examine how brands can design and implement inclusive messaging strategies that authentically engage marginalized consumer groups and translate into both cultural credibility and commercial value. To achieve this aim, the study pursues the following objectives:

1. To conceptualize and introduce the Inclusive Messaging Framework as a structured model for guiding inclusive marketing practices.
2. To apply the framework through an in-depth case study of Fenty Beauty, highlighting practical implementation.
3. To critically assess the benefits, limitations, and tensions that arise when embedding inclusion across the customer journey.
4. To generate actionable recommendations for marketing managers on adopting and scaling inclusive strategies across industries.

Research Questions

1. What principles and practices enable brands to embed authentic inclusion across the stages of the customer journey?
2. How does Fenty Beauty’s marketing strategy exemplify the Inclusive Messaging Framework in practice?
3. What barriers and challenges do organizations encounter when attempting to scale inclusive marketing strategies across markets and contexts?
4. What managerial actions or strategies can support the sustainable adoption of inclusive messaging at scale?

Literature Review

1. The Inclusive Messaging Framework

The Inclusive Messaging Strategy Framework is a structured model that helps brands design marketing messages that reflect real diversity and inclusion. It is not tied to one single author but is derived from the combined

work of marketing theorists, cultural researchers, and practitioners who focus on communication ethics and consumer engagement. The framework highlights that inclusive communication should be intentional, systematic, and tied to clear outcomes across the marketing process (Smith, 2019; Aaker, 2020) [1]. Its central aim is to enable brands to build trust with diverse groups and create genuine participation rather than symbolic gestures.

Scholars have drawn attention to the limits of brand communication that relies only on surface gestures of inclusion. Audiences are not satisfied with being shown token visibility; they usually want communication that feels deeper and carries genuine meaning. Aaker (2020) [1] notes that storytelling works best when it grows from real narratives that mirror the complexity of everyday human life. In a related way, Meyer (2015) [28] stresses that cultural sensitivity is vital—especially in international and multicultural settings where missing nuance can cause a campaign to seem shallow or even be misunderstood. Read together, these views suggest something important: inclusivity in marketing cannot be treated as a small act of goodwill. It is at once a moral obligation and a strategic decision that can, over time, reinforce brand strength.

From this starting point, the Inclusive Messaging Framework proposes four linked stages. The first, called the Visibility Creator, deals with the fact that some groups are often ignored in mainstream communication, and works to bring them into view in meaningful ways. The second stage, the Contextual Educator, goes further by highlighting cultural and social contexts while actively resisting stereotypes. The third, the Authentic Converter, places weight on credibility, ensuring that what brands claim is in step with what audiences expect, creating a sense of consistency and trust. Finally, the Community Steward draws attention to lasting engagement, encouraging brands to build dialogue and partnership with communities so that trust extends beyond one-off campaigns. Each stage comes with its own practical goals—ranging from visibility to loyalty—making the framework relevant both for academic research and for marketers in practice.

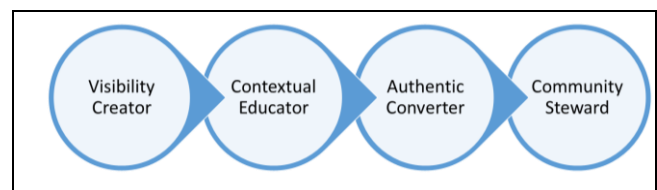


Fig 1: Inclusive Messaging Model

Table 1: Inclusive Marketing Funnel – Strategy, Audience & Metrics

Strategic Focus	Funnel Stage	Audience Type	Key Metric
Visibility Creator	Awareness (Top)	Broad, underrepresented groups	Reach & representation (share of voice, % of creative featuring target group)
Contextual Educator	Consideration (Middle)	Culturally specific voices	Sentiment & engagement (qualitative message resonance, dwell time)
Authentic Converter	Decision (Bottom)	Peer advocates / micro-influencers	Conversion rate & CPA (attributed to campaign touchpoints)
Community Steward	Loyalty (post-Sale)	Grassroots ambassadors/super-users	Retention, NPS, advocacy (UGC volume & referral rate)

The Visibility Creator aligns with the awareness stage of the marketing funnel. Its role is to ensure that groups often left out of mainstream narratives are able to recognize themselves in brand communication. The aim here is not just to place diverse figures in campaigns for the sake of appearance, but to make representation intentional and credible. When done well, this stage offers more than a fleeting image. It gives audiences something they can connect with and see as a true reflection of their identity. Cosmetic brands, for example, have demonstrated this by widening foundation shade ranges in markets where consumers with darker skin tones have long been neglected. Such efforts do more than broaden appeal; they also build credibility and expand reach (Su & Saint-Jacques, 2021). A striking illustration is Fenty Beauty's debut, which offered 40 foundation shades in its very first line. Within a month, the brand generated sales of \$72 million and attracted widespread media attention, underscoring the power of authentic representation to resonate with audiences (Lian & Gwynne, 2022) ^[24].

Once visibility is secured, the Contextual Educator stage begins. This is the consideration phase, where consumers are not only looking at whether they are represented, but whether the brand understands their lived experiences. Marketing content at this stage must reflect cultural context. This could be through language, storytelling, or community involvement in content creation. Campaigns that fail to move beyond surface-level diversity can create fatigue or skepticism among audiences. Instead, alignment with culture and authentic messaging can strengthen engagement (Su & Saint-Jacques, 2021).

At the decision stage, the Authentic Converter becomes central. Here, consumers evaluate whether the product is genuinely relevant to their needs. Trust and credibility matter most at this point. Brands can use peer advocates, micro-influencers, or respected community figures to deliver proof that products deliver as promised (Baghel, 2024) ^[4]. Unlike celebrity endorsements, these voices are closer to the audience and offer cultural fluency and lived experience. Such endorsements highlight usability, value for money, and ethical concerns in ways that feel authentic (Min *et al.*, 2019) ^[29].

The final stage, Community Steward, addresses loyalty after purchase. Many brands invest heavily in winning new customers but neglect existing ones (Chong & Patwa, 2023) ^[12]. For underrepresented audiences, this absence can create a sense that inclusion was only a marketing tactic. Wahab *et al.* (2022) ^[42] noted that continued involvement after purchase builds stronger trust and loyalty. Strategies may include giving consumers platforms to share their voices, fostering community dialogue, and encouraging the co-creation of content. When customers feel heard and valued, they are more likely to buy again and to act as brand advocates (Kumar & Shah, 2004 ^[22]; Rane *et al.*, 2023) ^[33].

2. The Evolution of Inclusive Marketing

Inclusive marketing has steadily progressed beyond mere visibility, aiming instead to foster participation, amplify underrepresented voices, and establish more systemic forms of representation. In much earlier campaigns, when marginalized groups such as racial minorities, low-income communities, older adults, or people with disabilities appeared, their presence was often symbolic rather than substantive (Campbell *et al.*, 2023). Jeong *et al.* (2024) ^[20]

describe this as the "illusion of inclusion," a practice where brands signal diversity at the surface while avoiding deeper structural commitments. Such efforts often emerge in response to cultural or social pressure. They may give the impression of visibility, yet the underlying assumptions about the consumer, the ideals that are celebrated, and the voices guiding brand narratives typically remain unchanged. To evaluate these practices with clarity, one must distinguish between concepts too often blurred together: representation, tokenism, and cultural appropriation. Although sometimes blurred together in public discussions, each describes a different way in which marketing can project inclusivity while still reinforcing exclusionary structures beneath the surface.

3. Representation, Tokenism, and Cultural Appropriation

To trace the evolution of inclusive marketing, it becomes necessary to clarify these terms, since they frame much of the current discussion around what inclusion in brand communication does, and does not, actually achieve. Representation refers to the act of depicting different identities and experiences within media, branding, or advertising (Campbell *et al.*, 2023). Representation is not merely reflective, but constitutive. This means that the way people are represented shapes how they are seen in society and how they see themselves. For underrepresented groups, being portrayed in marketing can influence public perception, access to opportunity, and individual self-concept (Wheatley, 2024) ^[43].

Tokenism, by contrast, refers to minimal or symbolic gestures toward inclusion that lack depth, consistency, or intent (Camargo, 2023) ^[9]. Kanter (in 1977) introduced the concept in organizational theory to describe the superficial inclusion of marginalized people, often to give the appearance of diversity without actually redistributing power (Lewis & Simpson, 2011) ^[23]. In marketing, tokenism might appear as featuring a Black model in an ad without ensuring the campaign's creative team includes Black voices or showing an older adult without challenging ageist narratives around beauty or competence.

Cultural appropriation is another critical concept, referring to the use of cultural elements, including symbols, clothing, and dialects from underrepresented communities by dominant groups in ways that are extractive, decontextualized, or disrespectful (Rogers, 2006) ^[34]. In marketing, this can manifest in campaigns that borrow visual styles, music, or language from communities of color without acknowledging or benefiting those communities. This often contributes to a cycle of exploitation rather than empowerment.

At the same time, intersectionality as coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) provides a theoretical lens for understanding how multiple axes of identity like race, class, age, and disability intersect to produce unique forms of exclusion or marginalization (Bixby, 2024) ^[7]. According to Crenshaw (2013) ^[13], the term challenges marketers to move beyond singular demographic categories and recognize how layered identities shape people's lived experiences, consumer behaviors, and media interpretations. A low-income, elderly Black woman with mobility issues, for instance, experiences the marketplace differently than a young, able-bodied white woman of the same economic status, yet mainstream advertising rarely reflects such nuance.

4. From Tokenism to Participation

For much of the 20th century, marketing and advertising were structured around the preferences of dominant groups, often white, middle-class, able-bodied consumers in Western societies. Most campaigns relied on broad messages that downplayed differences in order to appeal to an imagined homogeneous audience (O'Barr, 2012) ^[30]. Bartholomew (2009) ^[6] also noted that early advertisers used universal appeals to capture wide audiences, minimizing ethnic or economic distinctions. Historical advertising archives show that portrayals of racial minorities, disabled people, and other marginalized groups were rare and often framed in ways that reinforced inequality. When they appeared, it was usually through stereotypes, such as the "mammy," the "charity case," or the "unskilled laborer," which reproduced social hierarchies rather than challenged them (Arellano, 2017) ^[3]; McDole, 2017) ^[26].

The late 20th and early 21st centuries brought gradual shifts, partly influenced by civil rights and disability rights movements. Representation of underrepresented groups became more visible, but this visibility was often cosmetic (McDole, 2017) ^[26]. The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media (2019) reported that although racially diverse characters in advertising increased between 2006 and 2018, they were often placed in background roles or tied to narrow product categories, such as Black people in athletic wear or elderly people in pharmaceuticals (Geena Davis Institute, 2024) ^[18]. This selective inclusion suggested that companies sought symbolic diversity rather than genuine participation. Consumers frequently read such strategies as disingenuous, particularly when inclusive advertisements were not matched by equitable hiring, product design, or sustained engagement with marginalized communities. In contemporary contexts, audiences have become more critical of surface-level inclusion. Representation that once appeared progressive, such as casting a visibly disabled model or featuring an older person in a lifestyle advert, is now examined for authenticity and depth. People are increasingly aware that inclusion without structural support or meaningful involvement can become a form of exploitation (Grieco, 2024) ^[19]; Medda, 2023) ^[27]; Stanfel, 2024) ^[37]. Kipnis *et al.* (2021) ^[21] highlights that genuine cultural inclusion requires more than visibility. It requires voice, participation, and agency. The shift is therefore from being seen to being heard, from acting as a symbol to acting as a stakeholder within cultural and commercial spaces.

5. The Demand for Authenticity and Voice

Shah and Asghar (2023) ^[36] argued that consumer expectations have evolved significantly, particularly among younger, more diverse generations. As such, brands should address issues of social justice and inclusion in marketing. More importantly, they should back these values with consistent action. Since authenticity has become the currency of brand trust, performative gestures are quickly called out through social media, online reviews, and organized boycotts. Authenticity, however, is not something that can be artificially produced. It must arise from genuine internal alignment, reflected in practices such as inclusive hiring, supplier diversity, and adherence to accessibility standards, as well as from external forms of collaboration, including co-creation with the very communities being represented. This becomes especially critical for groups that have faced longstanding exclusion or even direct harm, such

as people living with disabilities or older adults in lower-income brackets. Sundar and Limperos (2013) ^[39] observe that digital audiences increasingly act as "active processors" of marketing content, applying a heightened level of critical media literacy when evaluating brand messages. Within such an environment, inclusive marketing cannot remain at the level of demographic box-checking but must move toward deeper and more meaningful engagement. Real inclusion cannot stop at putting diverse faces in an advert. It has to draw on cultural understanding, awareness of history, and a steady effort to remain present in the lives of communities. When brands shift from token presence to genuine participation, something bigger happens. It is not just a new style of messaging but it changes the balance of power. It decides whose voices carry weight, whose experiences get to set the tone, and how marketing is used to serve both fairness and business goals.

Results and Discussions

Case Study

A good example of this shift came in 2017 with the launch of Fenty Beauty by Rihanna. The brand now co-owned with luxury goods conglomerate–LVMH did more than release a few extra shades of makeup. It disrupted the market and redefined what inclusion could mean, showing that there was a huge audience waiting to be recognized (Fetto, 2020) ^[17]; Pandey & Brown, 2021) ^[31]. The success of Fenty rested on clear choices: shine a light on people who had been overlooked, create products that filled obvious gaps, and keep a strong sense of connection with consumers.

For comparison, Dove's Real Beauty campaign, which Unilever started back in 2004, took another path. It pushed for body diversity and self-esteem and became a well-known cultural statement. People talked about it and remembered it. But at the product level, Dove was slower to meet specific consumer needs—like shade variety or specialized solutions (Syaharani, 2021) ^[40]. Placing Fenty Beauty and Dove side by side reveals two distinct approaches to inclusivity. It also demonstrates how cultural influence and commercial outcomes may diverge depending on whether inclusion is pursued mainly through messaging or fully integrated into products themselves.

1. Stage 1 – Visibility Creator (Awareness)

From the outset, Fenty Beauty placed visibility for underrepresented consumers at the center of its launch strategy. The release of 40 foundation shades, spanning a wide spectrum of skin tones, was unprecedented at the time and immediately positioned the brand as more than a niche player. Marketing campaigns reinforced this message by showcasing models of varied ethnicities, skin tones, and cultural identities, and these visuals circulated both in mainstream fashion outlets and across high-traffic digital platforms. This combination of inclusive product design and wide-reaching representation allowed consumers to see Fenty as accessible to all. The results were striking: in the first month alone, the launch generated \$72 million in earned media value and substantially expanded the brand's share of voice within beauty coverage (Lian & Gwynne, 2022) ^[24]; Su & Saint-Jacques, 2021).

By contrast, Dove's Real Beauty campaign sought to challenge beauty norms by highlighting women of different body shapes, ages, and ethnic backgrounds. The campaign resonated emotionally and achieved significant visibility,

yet the product range itself remained fairly standard, without targeted innovation for underserved groups such as those with very deep or very fair complexions (Syaharani, 2021)^[40]. Dove measured success primarily through media reach, social engagement, and campaign impressions. What emerges from this comparison is a distinction in emphasis: Fenty aligned both its product line and its media strategy around inclusivity, while Dove relied more heavily on storytelling and emotional appeal.

2. Stage 2 – Contextual Educator (Consideration)

In the consideration phase, Fenty Beauty worked to frame inclusivity as a shared, universal value rather than a specialized feature for certain groups. Campaign narratives centered on the message that “beauty is for everyone,” reinforced by imagery of models in familiar, everyday contexts. This approach lessened the risk of tokenism while strengthening emotional connection with audiences. By weaving in authentic cultural narratives, the brand encouraged engagement that went deeper than visual representation alone. Evidence from social listening, influencer commentary, and sentiment analysis showed overwhelmingly positive responses. Digital engagement rates consistently exceeded industry benchmarks, suggesting that consumers valued Fenty’s ability to combine cultural nuance with effective product design (Su & Saint-Jacques, 2021; Lian & Gwynne, 2022)^[24].

Dove’s Real Beauty campaign, on the other hand, continued to highlight themes of diversity, self-esteem, and empowerment. These campaigns sparked broad discussion and emotional resonance, but again the product line remained less adaptable to specific needs, particularly at the margins of the shade spectrum. Performance indicators centered on sentiment, conversation share, and online engagement, rather than product conversion or targeted product-market fit (Syaharani, 2021)^[40]. The comparison shows a meaningful distinction: Fenty combined inclusivity in both product and messaging, creating a more comprehensive form of engagement, while Dove emphasized cultural relevance and emotional appeal without significantly tailoring its product offering.

3. Stage 3 – Authentic Converter (Decision)

At the decision-making stage, Fenty Beauty signaled a deeper and sustained commitment to inclusivity by extending its foundation range from 40 to 50 shades while ensuring consistent and fair pricing across the line. The company drew upon testimonials from everyday customers and micro-influencers, many of whom had long expressed frustration with the limited availability of suitable products. This choice lent the brand credibility and underscored its authenticity in ways that traditional advertising alone could not. The outcome was not merely symbolic. By the close of 2017, annual sales were estimated at nearly \$500 million, with conversion rates that surpassed industry averages across several demographic groups. These results illustrate how a genuine product-market fit, particularly when directed toward consumers historically overlooked, can translate into measurable purchasing behavior (Crockett, Grier, & Williams, 2003^[14]; Lian & Gwynne, 2022)^[24].

Dove’s Real Beauty campaigns, in contrast, pursued authenticity through advocacy. The focus rested less on product extension and more on associating the brand with themes of social value, confidence, and body positivity. This

approach helped cultivate a strong sense of trust and favorable public sentiment but did not directly expand the product base to serve unmet needs (Syaharani, 2021)^[40]. In this way, Dove’s ability to convert rested more on resonance with ethical and emotional ideals rather than on tangible adjustments to its offerings. Fenty’s case therefore demonstrates how authenticity, when expressed both through inclusive product solutions and supporting narratives, can move consumers from awareness to purchase. Dove, by contrast, highlights how advocacy-driven authenticity can strengthen brand reputation but does not always yield equivalent transactional outcomes.

4. Stage 4 – Community Steward (Loyalty)

In the loyalty phase, Fenty Beauty goes beyond the initial act of purchase by fostering an active sense of community. The brand frequently amplifies user-generated content, reposting images and reviews from customers across different cultural and social backgrounds. Its social media platforms thus function less as traditional marketing outlets and more as gathering spaces where everyday users and influencers share in collective visibility. Such practices reinforce emotional bonds, sustain consumer trust, and encourage continued patronage. Metrics indicate thousands of monthly posts tagged #FentyBeauty across multiple regions, and analysis shows a positive correlation between featured UGC and repeat purchase intent, reflecting strong Net Promoter Scores (NPS) and brand advocacy (Lian & Gwynne, 2022)^[24].

By contrast, Dove’s social campaigns, such as “Real Beauty Sketches,” focus on encouraging participation and sharing personal stories to promote self-esteem and body positivity. While these initiatives foster advocacy and align with the brand’s ethical positioning, the community management is less directly tied to ongoing product engagement. Repeat purchases and product loyalty are less measurable in relation to campaign participation (Syaharani, 2021)^[40]. This comparison demonstrates that Fenty integrates transactional and relational engagement, linking community involvement to product loyalty, whereas Dove emphasizes advocacy and brand ethos. Fenty’s approach shows how post-sale engagement can reinforce both cultural credibility and commercial success, making the brand a model for holistic inclusive marketing.

5. Integrated Analysis

Applying the Inclusive Messaging Strategy Framework, Fenty Beauty demonstrates how a brand can embed inclusivity across all four stages of the marketing funnel. Visibility Creator initiatives established broad representation, Contextual Educator campaigns integrated culturally nuanced storytelling, Authentic Converter strategies reinforced product-market fit, and Community Steward efforts fostered sustained engagement. How a brand designs its products, communicates its message, and maintains interaction with its community often determines whether its campaigns succeed both commercially and culturally. Dove illustrates this, although the company leaned more toward cultural recognition than toward adapting its products. Through storytelling that carried emotional weight and campaigns framed in ethical terms, Dove generated visibility, trust, and public debate. These efforts resonated strongly, yet the link to product innovation and consistent consumer engagement proved less

persuasive. In practice, the campaigns enhanced credibility but left gaps for consumers whose daily needs remained unmet.

For other brands, this contrast offers a useful lesson. The most effective outcomes tend to arise when inclusive narratives are supported by meaningful product changes and an ongoing relationship with consumers. Stories that affirm identity and values certainly matter, but they can fall short when practical gaps remain unaddressed. The task is therefore to find balance: moral positioning must be matched with products that provide real solutions. When both elements come together, inclusivity is more likely to endure and to feel genuinely authentic.

6. Key Findings

The case of Fenty Beauty is a striking example of how inclusive marketing works best when product design, storytelling, and community engagement are coordinated rather than operating separately. Expanding the product range certainly mattered, but the real impact came from combining that expansion with narratives that felt genuine, culturally aware, and grounded. On top of this, the brand continued interacting with consumers long after the initial purchase. Altogether, these actions produced not only measurable commercial success but also a kind of cultural credibility that many competitors still struggle to achieve.

Dove tells a somewhat different story. Its campaigns leaned heavily on emotional appeal and social advocacy, and they did succeed in building trust, encouraging loyalty, and sparking public discussions around beauty standards. Those accomplishments are by no means trivial. Yet without corresponding innovation in product offerings, especially in areas where consumers had concrete, unmet needs, the brand could not always convert cultural influence into deeper market penetration.

Looking at both examples side by side offers useful insight. Fenty shows how a product-driven, full-funnel approach can weave inclusivity through all stages of the customer journey, step by step. Dove, in contrast, illustrates the reach and resonance of ethically framed communication on a social level. For brands moving forward, the takeaway seems fairly clear: the most sustainable path may be one that combines the two approaches, ensuring products meet tangible needs while stories connect authentically across different communities.

Discussion

The case of Fenty Beauty stands out as a clear example of how a carefully structured commitment to inclusivity can shape not just commercial outcomes but also broader cultural conversations. The brand's approach did not rest on symbolic gestures alone; rather, diversity was woven throughout product development, brand messaging, and ongoing engagement with consumers. The decision to launch forty foundation shades was particularly striking. It brought into focus groups that had long been overlooked by mainstream cosmetics. Women with very deep skin tones, and those with very fair complexions, suddenly saw themselves represented in ways that felt tangible, meaningful, and deliberate. That visibility was not superficial; it carried substance, signaling that inclusion was central, not an afterthought. This kind of representation reaches further than surface visibility. It reflects what Su and Saint-Jacques (2021) call substantive inclusion, where

credibility grows precisely because the intent appears genuine rather than opportunistic.

Equally striking was the brand's style of storytelling. Fenty chose to frame inclusivity as something ordinary, even every day, rather than as a dramatic or staged display. Models were presented in settings that felt familiar, which gave the message a sense of normality. That choice seems small, yet it carried emotional weight. Escalas (2004) ^[16] argues that stories rooted in shared cultural values strengthen the ties between consumers and brands, and in many ways Fenty's approach affirms that claim. Data from consumer engagement and sentiment tracking suggested that audiences interpreted the campaign as authentic. This highlights a key point: inclusivity cannot be reduced to the width of a product line. It must also be reflected in narratives that align closely with how people see themselves and what they value (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2018) ^[32].

The brand's credibility was reinforced by what followed the launch. Expansion of the product line continued, and real testimonials were highlighted not only from well-known figures but also from everyday consumers and micro-influencers. These steps created a sense of consistency, and consistency is often what translates inclusive messages into sustained sales. Evidence from the Unstereotype Alliance and Oxford's Saïd Business School (2024) ^[35] points in a similar direction. Their global study found that authentically inclusive campaigns produced a 3.5 percent increase in short-term sales and a 16 percent rise in long-term growth. Fenty's own reported revenue of 500 million dollars, alongside high conversion rates across different demographic groups, seems to echo that evidence. The evidence points to a clear pattern: when inclusivity is embedded in both product and messaging, it resonates commercially as well as culturally.

Dove's Real Beauty campaign offers a useful contrast. The initiative earned recognition largely through emotionally driven storytelling and its focus on self-esteem. Consumers responded positively, showing trust and even a sense of admiration. Yet, the campaign's inclusive ethos did not extend as deeply into product development. Shade ranges and other practical features were not expanded to the same degree, leaving the approach less comprehensive compared with Fenty's (Syaharani, 2021) ^[40]. The contrast is instructive. Emotion-driven campaigns can indeed reshape perception and build loyalty, but their full potential is reached only when paired with product strategies that meet concrete needs. Fenty shows that inclusivity which runs through the entire marketing funnel has the power not only to shift cultural meaning but also to sustain long-term growth.

Challenges and Imperatives

Efforts to implement inclusive marketing, as demonstrated by Fenty Beauty, carry both promise and difficulty. The most immediate risk is that of performative inclusion, where a brand relies on diverse imagery or inclusive slogans without adjusting its products, pricing strategies, or internal structures. Such gestures often feel hollow and may even reinforce stereotypes rather than dismantle them, particularly in a digital environment where social media accelerates both praise and criticism (Su & Saint-Jacques, 2021). When promotional messages fail to match the actual product range, for example when deeper skin tones are

excluded, the outcome is not only disappointment but also backlash that damages credibility.

Authenticity requires more than outward messaging. It depends on alignment between external campaigns and internal decision-making. Teams that lack representation from the communities they depict often miss cultural nuance. Involving people with lived experience is therefore essential, though it is not always straightforward. Some companies have begun setting up advisory boards, hosting community consultations, or running co-creation workshops to guide decisions on product design, campaign messaging, and even media placement. These mechanisms help prevent campaigns from feeling like surface-level representation. Without them, diversity may appear on screen but still fail to connect in ways that matter (De Mooij, 2021)^[15].

Measurement introduces a second difficulty. Traditional metrics like impressions, click-throughs, follower counts capture breadth but rarely depth. They show how far a campaign travels, yet they reveal little about whether it resonates, builds trust, or shifts perception. More layered approaches are therefore required. Sentiment analysis, representation audits, and qualitative tools such as focus groups or social listening provide a richer picture. In practice, a modest campaign that strongly connects with an underserved community may deliver more value than a large-scale initiative that wins attention briefly and then fades (Nielsen, 2021).

The challenge deepens in global markets. As Chen-Xia *et al.* (2023)^[11] observe, cultural and regional differences can sharply affect interpretation. A message that inspires in one country may sound irrelevant or even offensive elsewhere. Broad strategies risk flattening distinct identities, while highly segmented ones risk lapsing into stereotypes. The balance lies in cultural insight, collaboration with local partners, and creative work developed alongside the very groups being portrayed. At the same time, brands must maintain some level of coherence. Governance structures can provide this, allowing flexibility in local execution without losing a consistent core identity (De Mooij, 2021)^[15].

Perhaps the hardest task is sustaining inclusivity over time. It cannot be left to the marketing function alone. Equity has to be built into product design, recruitment, and performance evaluation. Otherwise, gaps soon appear between message and practice. The brands most likely to endure are those that recognize these gaps openly, refine their systems of accountability, and learn to balance global reach with local sensitivity. By doing so, they stand a better chance of earning cultural credibility while also achieving long-term commercial success.

Conclusion

When comparing Fenty Beauty with Dove's Real Beauty campaign, a clear difference emerges in how inclusivity was put into practice. Fenty did not stop at using diverse faces in its adverts; it also changed the product itself by launching a foundation line that actually met the needs of consumers who had long been overlooked. The combination of authentic representation, a thoughtfully selected range of shades, and ongoing engagement with consumers through online communities seems to have generated both commercial success and cultural credibility. Dove, in comparison, demonstrates the power of storytelling that resonates with social values, particularly those related to

self-esteem and perceptions of body image. Its campaigns attracted attention and cultivated trust, yet the products themselves were not adapted in the same way. Consequently, the cultural recognition Dove achieved did not always translate into comparable market growth. Viewed together, these cases indicate that inclusion is most effective when it is embedded across the entire system, encompassing product development, brand communication, and continuous interaction with consumers. Without this integration, there is a risk that audiences will interpret inclusive efforts as symbolic rather than genuinely authentic, even when the campaigns are well executed.

Recommendations

Product development teams and designers should focus on creating offerings that truly meet the needs of groups often overlooked. This includes individuals with deeper skin tones, older adults, or people requiring accessible design. By doing so, brands show that inclusivity is not just a slogan or a gesture; it is a concrete effort that carries real value.

Marketing strategists and brand managers need to make sure campaigns strike a balance between emotional storytelling and authentic representation. Stories resonate most when they connect with audiences emotionally and also reflect real-life experiences. Without this alignment, even campaigns with good intentions can feel empty, no matter how polished they appear.

Social media managers and community engagement teams can encourage participatory dialogue. Platforms such as user-generated content and online forums allow consumers to shape the narrative themselves. This two-way exchange not only builds trust but also strengthens loyalty and encourages advocacy that lasts beyond a single campaign.

International marketing teams and local market managers should adapt campaigns carefully across regions. Brand identity must remain coherent, but messages also need to reflect local histories, values, and co-created content. When handled thoughtfully, campaigns resonate deeply without erasing cultural differences or falling into stereotypes.

References

1. Aaker D. Creating signature stories: Strategic messaging that persuades, energizes and inspires. Morgan James Publishing, 2020.
2. Ali M, Sapiezynski P, Bogen M, Korolova A, Mislove A, Rieke A. Discrimination through optimization: How Facebook's ad delivery can lead to skewed outcomes. arXiv,2019:1904:02095. <https://arxiv.org/abs/1904.02095>
3. A J, Kwak H. Gender and racial diversity in commercial brands' advertising images on social media. arXiv,2019:1908.01352. <https://arxiv.org/abs/1908.01352>
4. Arellano G. Latino Representation on Primetime Television in English and Spanish Media. Master's Theses,2017:4785. <https://doi.org/10.31979/etd.2wvs-3sd3>
5. Baghel D. Influencer authenticity as a catalyst for brand trust: Analyzing its impact on consumer perception. ShodhKosh Journal of Visual and Performing Arts,2024:5(6):1-12. <https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.3329>

6. Bartholomew M. Advertising and Social Identity. SSRN Electronic Journal,2009:58(4):1-25. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1457236>
7. Bixby LE. Intersectional Inequalities: How Socioeconomic Well-being Varies at the Intersection of Disability, Gender, Race-Ethnicity, and Age. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*,2024;91:100938. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rssm.2024.100938>
8. Brodzik C, Young N, Cuthill S, Drake N. Authentically inclusive marketing. *Deloitte Insights*, 2021. <https://www2.deloitte.com/xe/en/insights/topics/marketing-and-sales-operations/global-marketing-trends/2022/diversity-and-inclusion-in-marketing.html>
9. Camargo A. Developing strategies to improve the sense of belonging and mitigate tokenism. *Clinical Imaging*,2023;103:109987. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.clinimag.2023.109987>
10. Campbell C, Sands S, McFerran B, Mavrommatis A. Diversity Representation in Advertising. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*,2023;53(2):1-29. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-023-00994-8>
11. Chen-Xia XJ, Betancor V, Rodríguez-Gómez L, Rodríguez-Pérez A. Cultural variations in perceptions and reactions to social norm transgressions: a comparative study. *Frontiers in Psychology*,2023;14(1):1243955. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1243955>
12. Chong WK, Patwa N. The Value of Integrity: Empowering SMEs with Ethical Marketing Communication. *Sustainability*,2023;15(15):11673. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su151511673>
13. Crenshaw K. Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. In *Feminist legal theories*. Routledge,2013:23-51.
14. Crockett D, Grier SA, Williams JA. Coping with marketplace discrimination: An exploration of the experiences of black men. *Academy of Marketing Science Review*,2003;4(7):1-21.
15. De Mooij M. Global Marketing and Advertising: Understanding Cultural Paradoxes. In *Global Marketing and Advertising*. SAGE Publications Ltd, 2021. <https://www.torrossa.com/it/resources/an/5282213>
16. Escalas JE. Narrative processing: Building consumer connections to brands. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*,2004;14(1-2):168-180.
17. Fetto F. How Fenty Beauty Changed the State of Play in the Industry. *British Vogue*, 2020. <https://www.vogue.co.uk/beauty/article/rihanna-fenty-beauty-diversity>
18. Geena Davis Institute. Bias & Inclusion in Advertising: An Analysis of 2019 Cannes Lion Work. Geena Davis Institute,2024. <https://geenadavisinstitute.org/research/bias-inclusion-in-advertising-2/>
19. Grieco C. Conceptualizing Inclusive Marketing: A Synthesis of Theory and Practice. *European Management Journal*, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2024.09.008>
20. Jeong Y, Shaw J, Ritchart E, Dunnam CC. The Impact of the 2020 BLM Resurgence on the Racial Representations of Ads and Ad Evaluations: Analysis of Super Bowl Ads. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10776990241274740>
21. Kipnis E, Demangeot C, Pullig C, Cross SNN, Cui CC, Galalae C, *et al.* Institutionalizing Diversity-and-Inclusion-Engaged Marketing for Multicultural Marketplace Well-Being. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*,2021;40(2):143–164. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743915620975415>
22. Kumar V, Shah D. Building and sustaining profitable customer loyalty for the 21st century. *Journal of Retailing*,2004;80(4):317–329. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretai.2004.10.007>
23. Lewis P, Simpson R. Kanter Revisited: Gender, Power and (In)Visibility. *International Journal of Management Reviews*,2011;14(2):141–158. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2370.2011.00327.x>
24. Lian J, Gwynne J. What does it take to be ‘Savage’? Diversity, empowerment and representation in Rihanna’s Savage× Fenty fashion show. In *The Cultural Politics of Femvertising: Selling Empowerment*. Springer International Publishing,2022:99-113.
25. Loos E, Ivan L. Visual ageism in the media. In Ayalon L, Tesch-Römer C, editors, *Contemporary perspectives on ageism*. Springer, Cham,2018:191-206. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-73820-8_11
26. McDole A. Mammy Representations in the 21st Century. *Surface at Syracuse University*, 2017. <https://surface.syr.edu/thesis/194>
27. Medda S. Inclusivity for dummies: How to tell if your ad is tokenistic. *SocialSamosa*, 2023. <https://www.socialsamosa.com/writers-corner/inclusivity-for-dummies-how-to-spot-a-tokenistic-ad>
28. Meyer E. When culture doesn’t translate. *Harvard Business Review*,2015;93(10):66-72.
29. Min JHJ, Chang HJJ, Jai T-MC, Ziegler M. The effects of celebrity-brand congruence and publicity on consumer attitudes and buying behavior. *Fashion and Textiles*,2019;6(1):1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40691-018-0159-8>
30. O’Barr WM. Sexuality, Race, and Ethnicity in Advertising. *Advertising & Society Review*,2012;13(3). <https://doi.org/10.1353/asr.2012.a491084>
31. Pandey M, Brown L. Fenty Beauty: How make-up helped Rihanna become a billionaire. *BBC News*, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-58084543>
32. Ramaswamy V, Ozcan K. What is co-creation? An interactional creation framework and its implications for value creation. *Journal of Business Research*,2018;84:196-205.
33. Rane N, Achari A, Choudhary SP. Enhancing customer loyalty through quality of service: Effective strategies to improve customer satisfaction, experience, relationship, and engagement. *International Research Journal of Modernization in Engineering Technology and Science*,2023;5(5):427–452. <https://doi.org/10.56726/irjmet.38104>
34. Rogers RA. From cultural exchange to transculturation: A review and reconceptualization of cultural appropriation. *Communication Theory*,2006;16(4):474-503.

35. Saïd Business School. The Business Case for Inclusive Advertising: The positive impact of authentically inclusive messaging on sales, loyalty, and brand value. University of Oxford, 2024. <https://www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/news/new-research-proves-inclusive-advertising-boosts-sales-and-brand-value>
36. Shah SS, Asghar Z. Dynamics of Social Influence on Consumption choices: a Social Network Representation. *Heliyon*,2023;9(6):17146. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e17146>
37. Stanfel A. Inclusivity in Branding: Beyond Tokenism to Genuine Representation. Stanfel Media, 2024. <https://www.stanfelmedia.com/elite-edge-news/inclusivity-in-branding-beyond-tokenism-to-genuine-representation>
38. Su W, Saint-Jacques G. Measuring equity: Funnel representation measurement. *arXiv*,2021:2112:08166.
39. Sundar SS, Limperos AM. Uses and Grats 2.0: New Gratifications for New Media. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*,2013;57(4):504–525. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2013.845827>
40. Syaharani DI. The Effectiveness of Dove Campaign for Real Beauty in Affecting Customers' Purchase Decision toward Dove Products. *Advanced International Journal of Business, Entrepreneurship and SMEs*,2021;3(9):244–264. <https://doi.org/10.35631/aijbes.39017>
41. Verbytska A, Lysenko I, Babachenko L, Kraskivska N. Inclusive social marketing: Representation and diversity in brand campaigns. *Marketing and Branding Research*,2023;10(1):45-58.
42. Wahab HKA, Tao M, Alam F, Ocloo EC. Impact of Value Co-Creation on Customer Loyalty. *International Journal of E-Business Research*,2022;18(1):1–20. <https://doi.org/10.4018/ijebr.309390>
43. Wheatley M. Media Representation and Cultural Identity. *Premier Journal of Social Science*, 2024, 100004. <https://doi.org/10.70389/pjss.100004>