



MEJO 792

Dove



***The Code:** Reclaiming Real Beauty
in the Age of AI*

MARIAM ALI

Background:

Dove has long been a leader in challenging the status quo.

Its 2004 campaign for Real Beauty opened up space in advertising for authentic representations of women to flourish. Since then, Dove has challenged airbrushing, digital distortion, and narrow beauty standards, proving that real people and real stories matter. The industry took notice. What began as a bold move became a standard that other brands would follow as well.

But its journey did not start there. Launched in the 1950s by the Lever Brothers, Dove entered the U.S. market with a cleansing bar made with $\frac{1}{4}$ moisturizing cream (Unilever, 2023). Dermatologists endorsed it, and by the 1980s, it had become a household staple across the U.S., Canada, and France (Unilever, 2023).

Over time, Dove's evolved from a skincare brand to a care brand, shifting its focus from product to purpose. Known for promoting authenticity, Dove has addressed a range of issues, from body image to now AI.

And once again, Dove is not staying quiet.

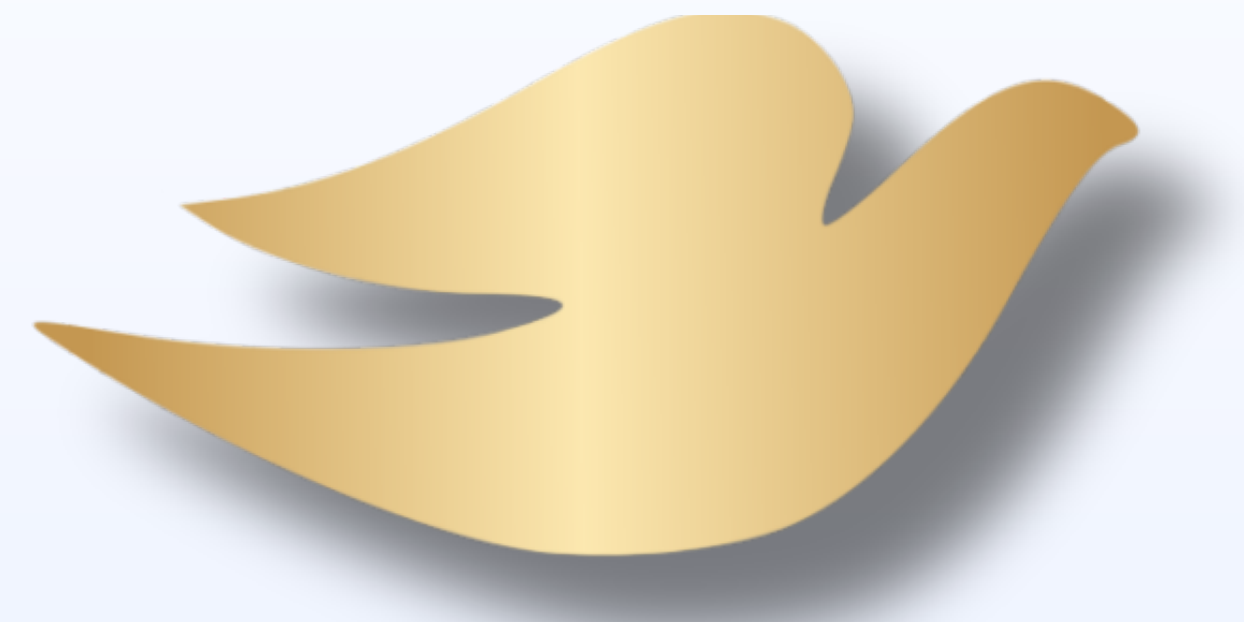


Executive Summary:

Dove's 2024 "The Code" campaign enters the conversation around AI and beauty with purpose. As AI-generated images flood digital spaces and reinforce outdated beauty ideals, Dove took a stand to protect the progress it helped build. Rather than embracing AI unquestioningly, the brand used AI to expose its bias—reclaiming space for real, inclusive beauty and reaffirming the values it has championed for over two decades.

AI is trending. Brands are adopting it quickly. Few asked what it meant in terms of representation. Dove did. **Its mission is to protect real beauty before it gets redefined by machines.** Dove opted into the conversation not by condemning AI but by flipping the script and using it to make its point.

This capstone examines how Dove activated across film, social media, print, and education to reassert its values in the age of AI. This project also explores the strategy that turned a cultural risk into an opportunity for leadership.



keep beauty real

Problem:

By 2015, 90% of online content is predicted to be AI-generated (Garfinkle, 2023). With AI tools already accessible and integrated into everyday platforms, beauty standards are being reinforced by biased algorithms. Left unchecked, it may reverse decades of work that Dove and others have done to expand the concept of real beauty.

A Washington Post investigation found that when asked to generate images of a "beautiful woman," three top AI tools consistently produced homogenous results: 53% had pale skin, only 9% had dark skin, and 100% had slim body types (Tiku & Chen, 2024).

This version of beauty – thin and Eurocentric – is not new. But AI is amplifying it faster and with fewer checks in place. These outputs live beyond the image generators and are integrated into social platforms, and the tools brands use to communicate.

Whether realized or not, opting out of AI is not always an option. What is getting reinforced is a version of beauty that sidelines women who do not fit the algorithmic frame—**the threat here:** the erasure of real women in favor of machine-made ideals.

yahoo/finance

90% of online content could be 'generated by AI by 2025,' expert says

Is beauty ready for AI?

Artificial beauty: Warning of threats to girls' self-esteem, Dove recommits to never using AI in ads

The beauty company also released the results of its survey of perceptions of beauty: 'Unrealistic images'

AI beauty pageants and hyper- perfectionism: Welcome to the age of 'meta face'



Opportunity:

In 2024, the brand launched **#TheCode**, marking the 20th anniversary of the Real Beauty campaign (Dove, 2025). The brand took a firm pledge never to use AI to represent real women in its advertising (Dove, 2025). As many brands embraced AI, Dove used it to reveal the issue – then doubled down on its mission to keep beauty real.

Dove's campaign was not about resisting innovation. It was more about protecting progress.

For a brand that has built decades of equity on authenticity and care, this was an opportunity to reaffirm that those values are non-negotiable (Dove, 2025). By calling out a cultural threat instead of following it, Dove remained consistent and led with conviction.



Objectives:

With The Code, Dove set out to maintain the same values it's had over the past 20 years: to take a public stance against the use of AI-generated images of women in advertising and raise awareness of how AI reinforces outdated beauty standards (Dove, 2025). At the same time, Dove aimed to regain trust in honest, unedited representation and remind people of what it has always stood for (Dove, 2025). Ultimately, this campaign was a call to the industry to prioritize people over perfection.



Insight and Strategy

Dove has earned trust by pushing back against unrealistic standards. Through efforts such as the Dove Self-Esteem Project and media literacy work, it has demonstrated a long-term commitment to women's well-being (Dove Self-Esteem Project, n.d.-a).

But AI poses a powerful threat— it's shaping what people see and internalize. According to Dove (2025), 9 in 10 girls are exposed to harmful beauty content before age 13, and 1 in 3 feel pressured to change their appearance. **The real risk isn't just misrepresentation—it's erasure.** Even edited images, when disclosed, still reinforce impossible beauty ideals (Francombe, 2025).

Now, these standards are being set by biased algorithms. For digitally active women 18–35, aware of shifting beauty norms, the result is a version of beauty that's artificial.

Insight: Women don't want to be digitally perfected or reimaged—they want to be seen and represented as they are. The more AI pushes a narrow standard, the more real beauty feels invisible.

Strategy: Don't reject AI, but reframe it. **#TheCode** put real women back in focus and offered tools to shift the narrative and emphasize the brand's commitment to authenticity.



The Strategy:

Consumer

Women are exposed to unrealistic beauty standards online – now amplified by AI. They want to see beauty that reflects real people, not digital perfection.

Culture

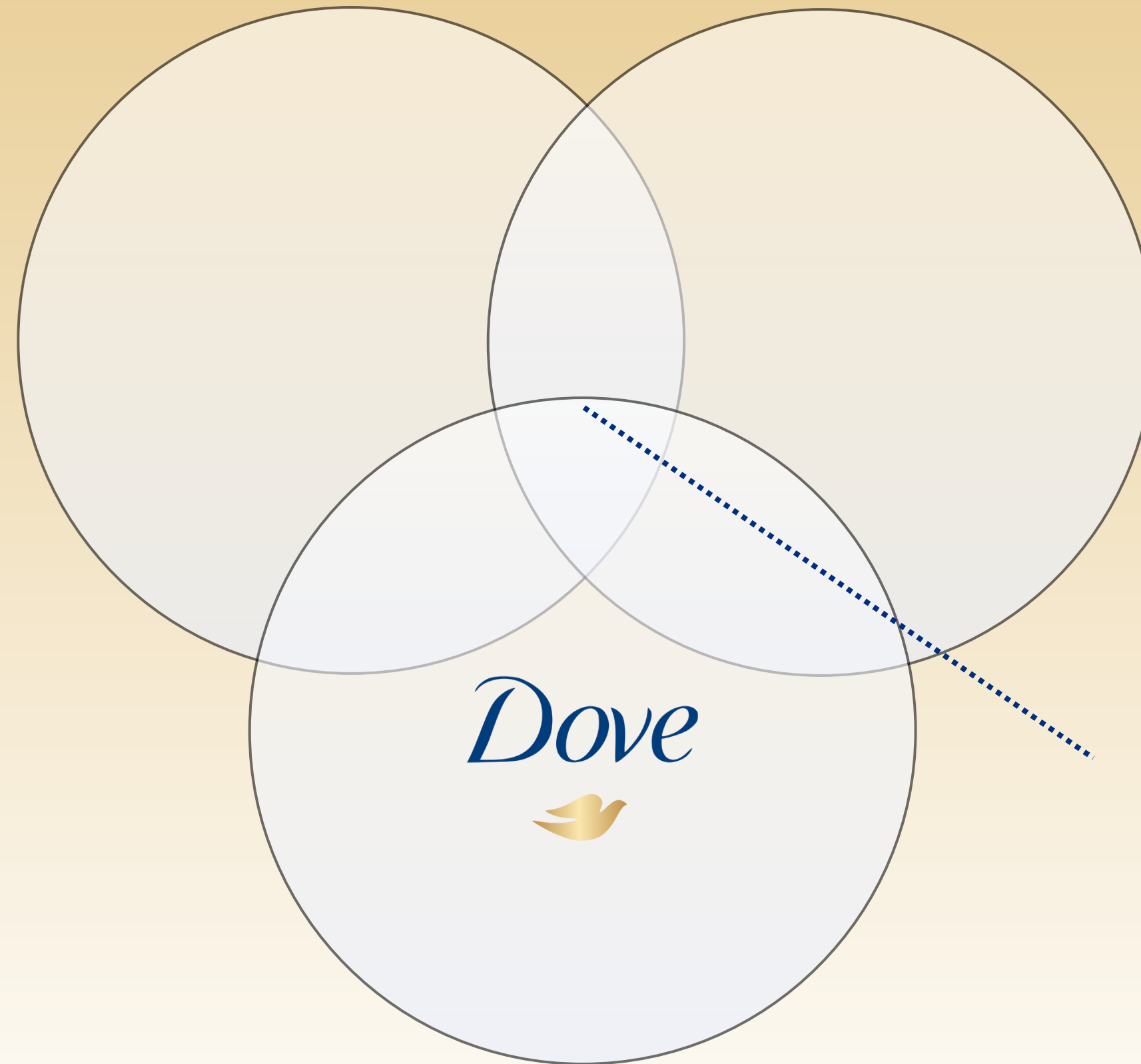
Generative AI is shaping who gets seen and reinforcing beauty standards with biased data and little oversight.

Brand

Dove has the credibility and legacy to speak up. It's been leading this conversation for 20 years.

Strategic Thought

Use Dove's platform to expose bias, reassert the definition of real beauty, and provide people with tools to maintain human representation.



Campaign Analysis: Film

The creative led with a film that aired in more than 30 countries ([Shorty Awards, 2024](#)). It paired AI-generated visuals with a raw vocal performance of “Pure Imagination” by Victoria Canal, an artist known for her advocacy ([Victoria Canal, 2025](#)).

The film did not rely on shock or heavy narration. It instead allowed viewers to feel the discomfort with machine-made beauty.

The creative decision was intentional: real emotion vs. artificial perfection, human voices vs. machine-made faces.

Dove will never use AI to create or distort women's images. |

[Learn more at Dove.com](#)



Campaign Analysis: Social Media & Partnerships

To further its message, Dove partnered with actors like Drew Barrymore and Reba McEntire and online creators Samyra and Taryn Delanie.

Reba McEntire

- “Just saw my AI portrait and let me just say—she’s no Reba.”
- 📊 236.1K likes • 3,972 comments • 7,818 saves • 5,980 shares

Drew Barrymore

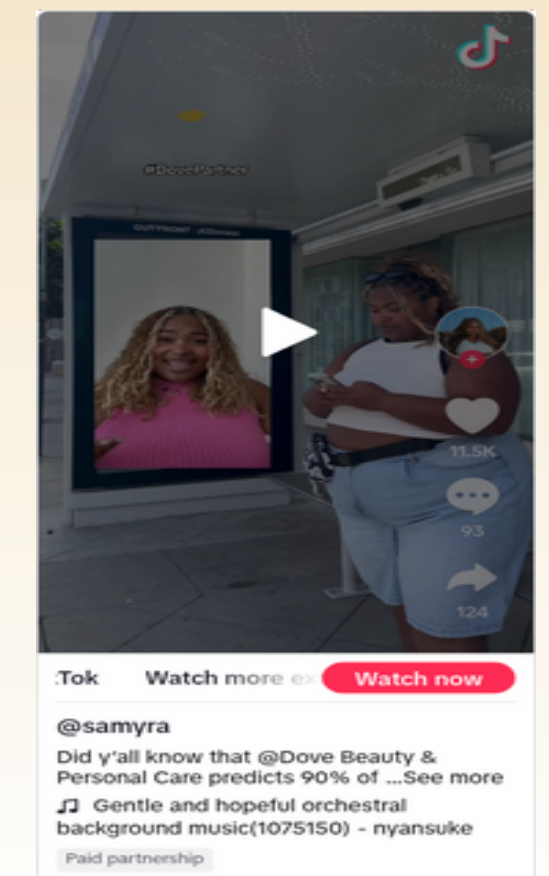
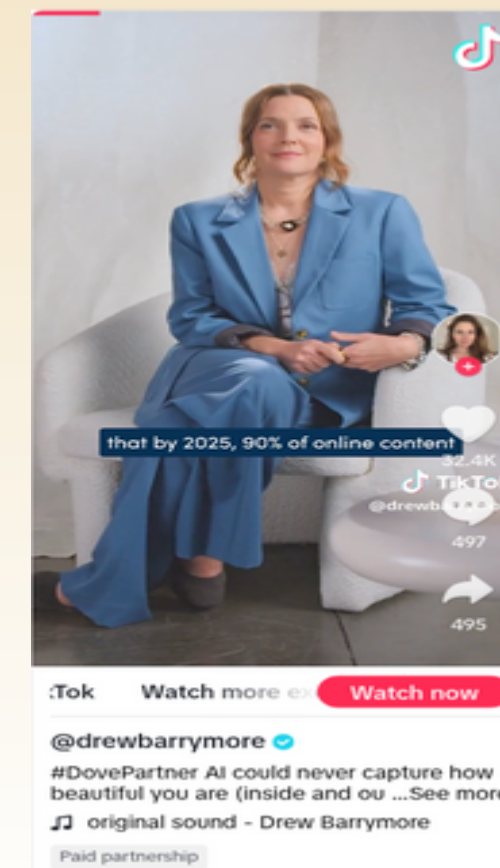
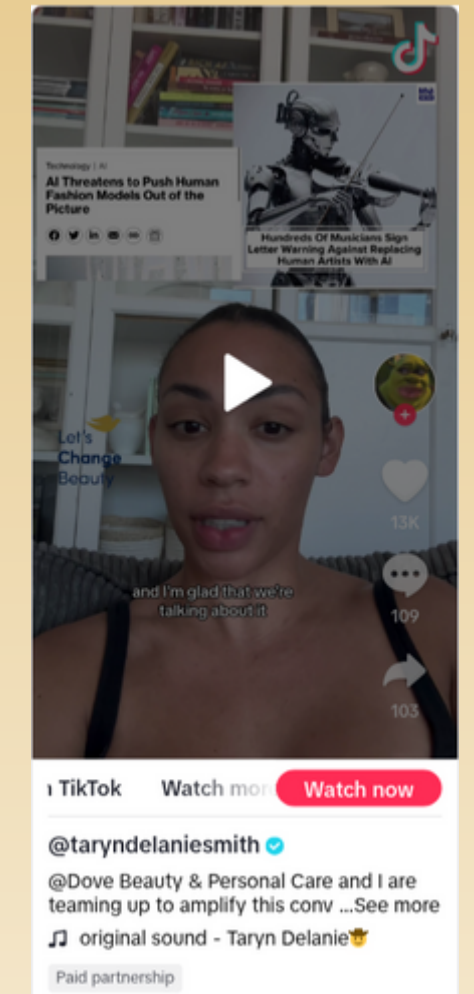
- “AI could never capture how beautiful you are inside and out.”
- 📊 32.4K likes • 496 comments • 1,134 saves • 495 shares

Taryn Delanie

- Tagged Dove and emphasized that her AI portrait “lacked the features that make her human-like skin texture and freckles.”
- 📊 13K likes • 109 comments • 388 saves • 103 shares

Samyra

- Called out AI’s bias using Dove’s 90% stat.
- 📊 11.5K likes • 93 comments • 488 saves • 124 shares

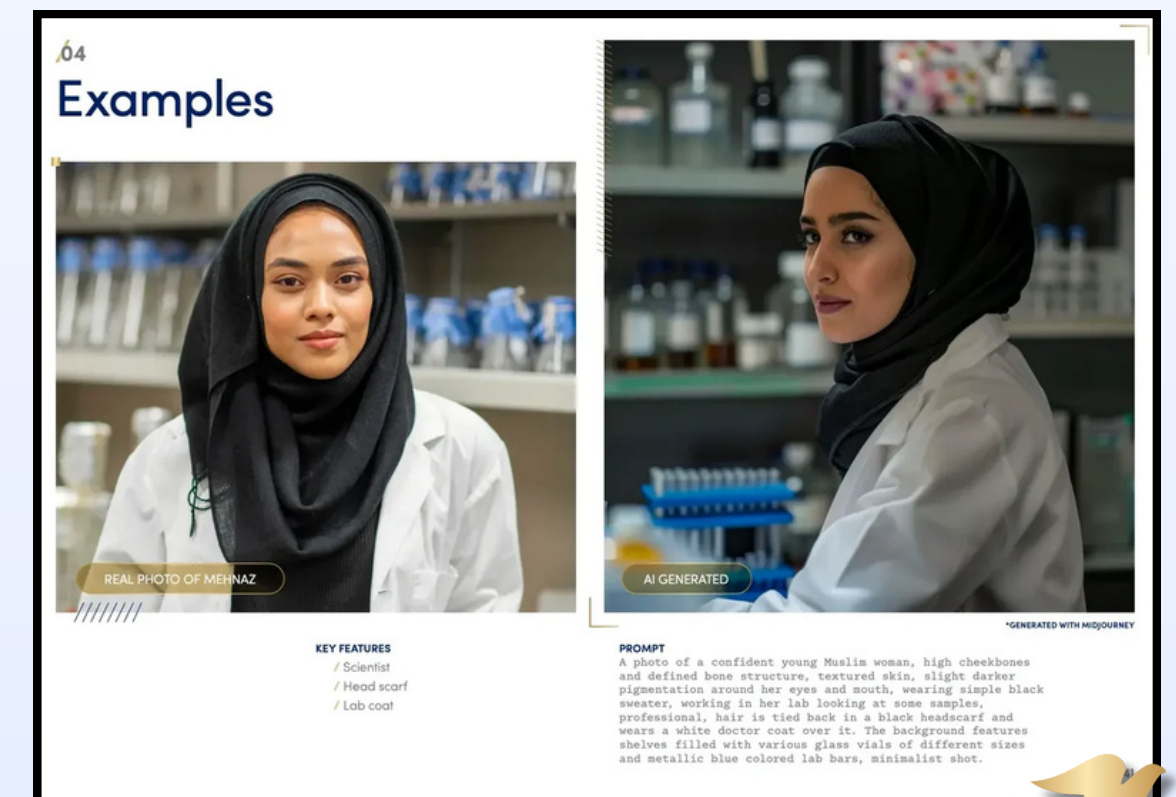
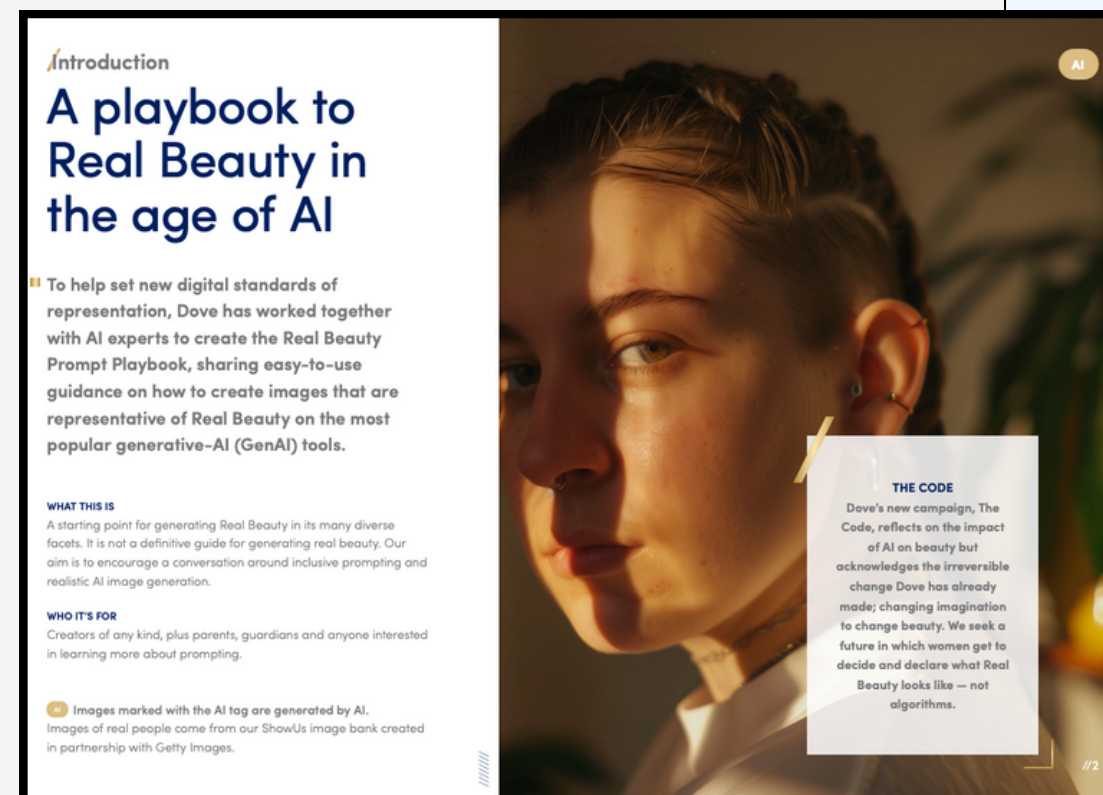
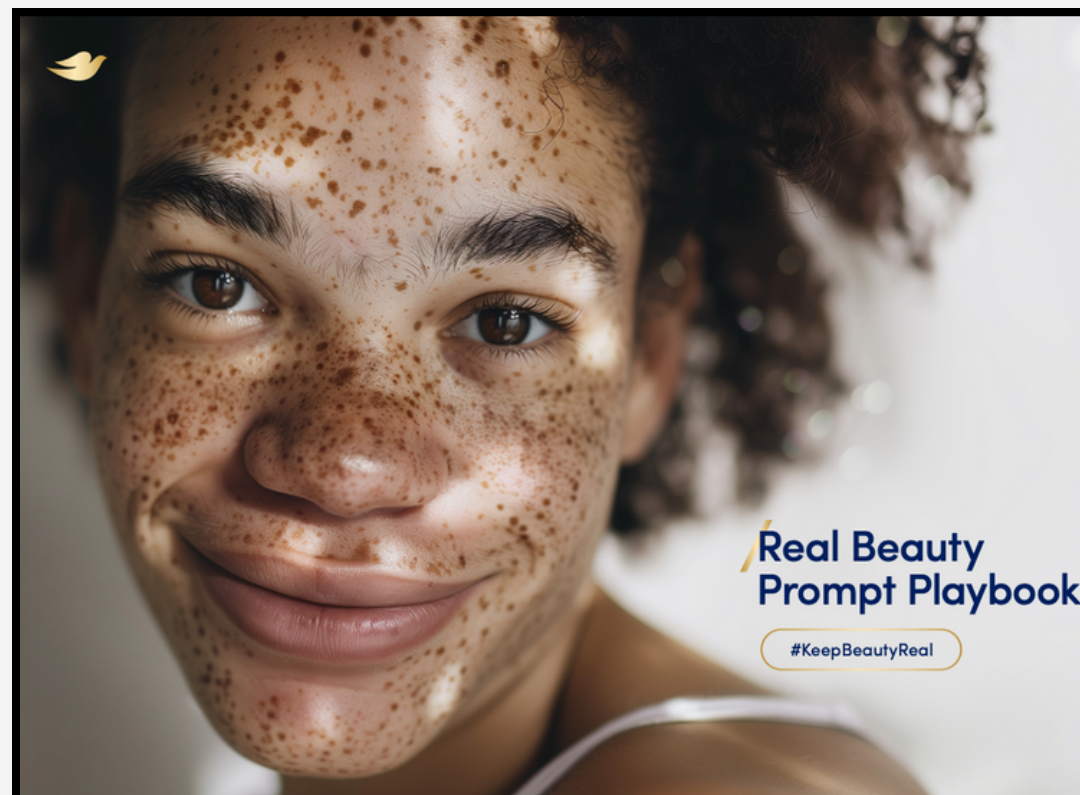


Campaign Analysis: AI Guidelines

To keep its mission front, Dove released Real Beauty Prompt Guidelines -- a 72-page playbook to help users generate more inclusive images with AI.

Provides

- Context on AI's bias and its impact on beauty
- Guidance on writing inclusive, diverse image prompts
- Do's & don'ts, techniques, and sample outputs
- A glossary of inclusive terms (e.g., skin tone, gender, emotion)
- Reflective questions and future-facing insight on AI in beauty



Campaign Analysis: OOH and Pinterest

Dove collaborated with Mindshare and Pinterest to put users in control of defining beauty. Through an interactive REAL Beauty DNA experience, people made what they believed beauty should look like. Results were shared in OOH displays.

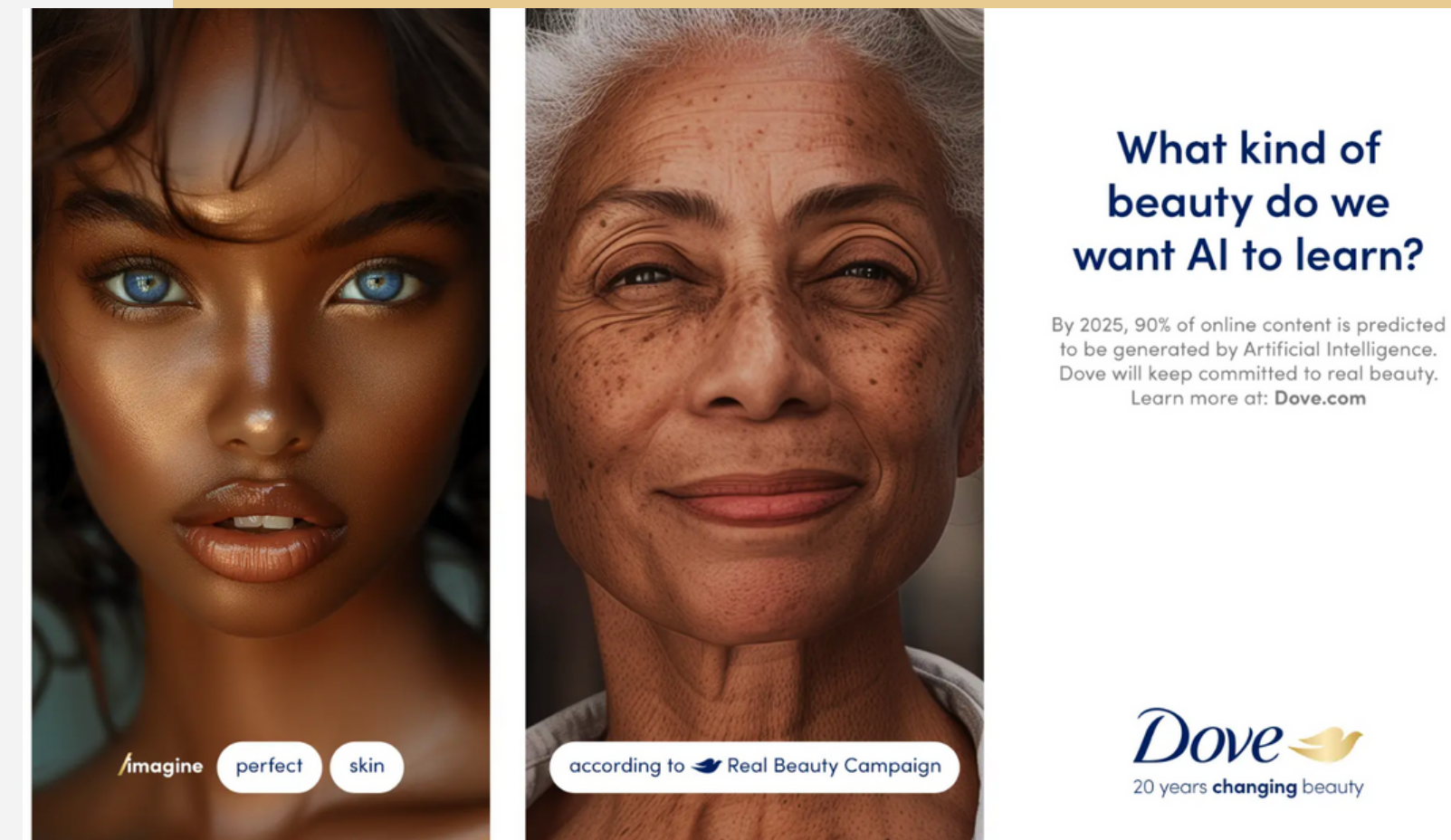
The OOH displays were observed in London, Tokyo, and New York.

The Real Beauty content on Pinterest reached **27 million people**. Women reported **21.4% higher engagement rates** with the custom experience versus Pinterest benchmarks.

Dove's campaign on the Pinterest platform also drove:

- 27% higher impressions for search takeover ads
- 33% lower CPM
- 14% higher reach from search takeover campaign

*compared to the brand's 2023 benchmarks.



Impact / Result

One of the campaign's biggest strengths was its close alignment with Dove's identity. **#TheCode** succeeded by applying Dove's long-term commitment to real beauty to a high-stakes issue. And the numbers back it up:

- **4B+ organic impressions,**
- **94% positive sentiment**
- **Most media coverage** in Dove's history (Shorty Awards, 2024).

It was not just about awareness either. The Real Beauty Prompt Guidelines transformed the campaign into something actionable, with **over 10,000 downloads in the first two weeks** (Shorty Awards, 2024).

Through a collab with Pinterest and Mindshare, Dove helped reshape how beauty is discovered online. Users could define Real Beauty's DNA, generating **787 million impressions and a 336% increase in engagement** (McClellan, 2025).

Industry impact followed. Dove earned a **Media Grand Prix at Cannes Lions**, with accolades noting its influence on AI ethics. (McClellan, 2025).

Dove Wins Cannes Lions Media Grand Prix for Championing 'Real Beauty' in the Age of AI

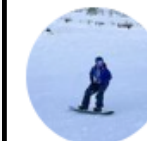


Ayori 'Selfpreneur' Selassie • 3rd+

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Whoever is running marketing at [Dove](#) is doing an outstanding job. They just showed us what great marketing can do with AI, and what AI can do for great marketing, without hype, and without fear. Excellent job. They must be partnering with [The Algorithmic Justice League](#) or something 🤖.



cache.io

This is the kind of advertising I can get behind ❤️

2024-5-11 [Reply](#)



@Scry999 1 year ago

Wow, whenever I hear about ads I am always left slightly annoyed and disappointed, but this is the first time I'm actually impressed and teary eyed, good job dove.

👍 60 [Reply](#)



Conclusion

#The Code campaign marked a bold return to form. One of its greatest strengths was its clear alignment with Dove's brand identity. Rather than chasing innovation, Dove questioned it and equipped people with tools like the Real Beauty Prompt Guidelines.

By leading with principle over product, it's harder to know if the campaign drove sales or strengthened Dove's cultural relevance.

The message may also have gone over the heads of those unfamiliar with how AI shapes digital content. As tech changes, Dove's firm stance could eventually come across as inflexible if not thoughtfully updated. But for now, it is a strategic advantage. Dove entered the conversation early, doing so with credibility and care.

As a strategic communicator, this campaign reminded me that the best brand work shapes its culture. **#The Code** is a case study in leading with brand values. It emphasized consistency and long-term brand building.

The real challenge now is sustaining that momentum. If Dove continues to show up with this level of clarity and conviction, it will continue to lead as it is currently.



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Thank You!

Q & A

