

How Lifestyle Brands' DEI Strategies Impact Perceived Authenticity

Dhruvi Bodavula

Lumiere Education

DOI: 10.46609/IJSSER.2026.v11i06.028 URL: <https://doi.org/10.46609/IJSSER.2026.v11i06.028>

Received: 10 June 2025 / Accepted: 25 June 2026 / Published: 30 June 2026

Introduction

This study looks at how lifestyle brands' use of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) strategies in campaigns impacts perceived brand authenticity. Lifestyle brands' use of DEI strategies has become one of the defining issues in branding today. For lifestyle brands especially, campaigns are equally about selling values, identities and a sense of belonging as they are about selling products. People choose brands that say something about who they are and what they believe in. This means that DEI strategies, like showing diverse representation in ads or standing up for social issues, directly influence whether consumers connect with a brand or not. Authenticity is essential to this connection. A brand can spend millions creating a polished campaign but if audiences don't see it as genuine, the effort risks backfiring.

Research has long explored authenticity in branding. Scholars have described it through multiple lenses: objectivist (linked to history and craftsmanship), constructivist (shaped by consumer perception) and existentialist (being true to inner values). More recently, researchers like Morhart et al. (2015) have shown that authenticity is not a fixed quality but something that exists in the interaction between brand actions and consumer judgments. Other scholars, like Bruhn et al. (2012), highlight four "building blocks" of authenticity: consistency, originality, reliability, and genuineness. These qualities help explain why some campaigns feel "real" while others feel staged.

Despite this growing body of research, there is still limited understanding of authenticity in the specific context of DEI campaigns. One reason for this gap is that studies of authenticity usually look at brands as a whole rather than as single campaigns. However, studies of DEI in marketing often focus narrowly on representation in one ad, without connecting it to the brand's overall reputation and history. This separation creates a blind spot. For example, a campaign might look inclusive on the surface, but consumers often connect it to the company's past controversies or wider practices, especially in the age of social media where "receipts" are permanent. That complexity makes it harder to measure authenticity in DEI.

Another challenge comes from the speed and openness of consumer reactions online. On platforms like Instagram, Reddit and YouTube, people comment and debate ads in real time instead of just consuming them or getting influenced by them. This means authenticity is something that is actively built and questioned in public discussions. Prior research has not always captured this complex, consumer-driven side of authenticity. Instead, much of it still relies on controlled surveys or brand statements, which can easily miss tones like sarcasm.

This study aims to bridge that gap by examining how consumers themselves judge the authenticity of lifestyle brands' DEI campaigns. It does so by analysing comments on three well-known campaigns: Fenty Beauty's "*Beauty for All*" launch, Nike's "*You Can't Stop Us*" sports ad and Dove's long-running "*Real Beauty*" campaign. These cases represent different approaches to DEI branding. Fenty made inclusivity a core part of the brand from the start. Alternatively, Nike often mixes activism with global marketing and Dove has championed diverse representations of beauty but faces criticism for contradictions from its parent company, Unilever. The study explores when DEI efforts are seen as authentic and when they are dismissed as performative, by looking at consumer comments on these campaigns.

The approach is different from past studies because it relies on immediate consumer voices instead of corporate claims. By decoding social media comments' analysis of brands as authentic, not authentic or neutral, based on the four building blocks of authenticity, this study's findings highlight three important points: first, that authenticity is strongest when DEI is part of a brand's identity rather than a one-off campaign; second, that representation builds trust only when it feels meaningful and consistent; and third, that contradictions between campaigns and wider company practices quickly weaken authenticity.

The current situation for lifestyle brands is challenging. On the one hand, DEI is now expected as younger consumers, especially Gen Z and Millennials, want brands to reflect their values. On the other hand, the margin for error is small. Performative or inconsistent DEI efforts are quickly noticed by consumers, sometimes damaging brand trust more than staying silent would have. This makes authenticity a requirement for survival in competitive markets. By focusing on consumer reactions to DEI, this study contributes to the existing literature by showing how authenticity is judged in practice, instead of just in theory. Ultimately, the goal is to help explain how lifestyle brands can engage in DEI in a way that resonates as genuine and authentic.

Literature Review

Consumers today don't just buy from lifestyle brands because they need products. They often buy from them because the brands say something about who they are. Aaker (1999) explains that

people use brands to express themselves and shape how others see them. This is especially true for lifestyle brands, as for these brands, purchases are often linked to values and identity.

The problem, though, is that the market is crowded with initiatives that feel fake or repetitive. Boyle (2004) points out that consumers are bombarded with meaningless advertisements and offers, so they look for brands that feel real. This is where authenticity comes in. It has become a key factor for why people stay loyal to certain brands.

This focus on authenticity is especially strong among younger consumers. Research shows that a majority of Gen Z and Millennials avoid companies that don't show genuine commitment to social and environmental issues. They expect brands to take a stand and reflect their values—it's not enough for brands to just sell good products. In this way, authenticity has become part of what makes a lifestyle brand successful.

Authenticity can mean different things to different people. Scholars have explained it in three ways:

First, the objectivist view sees authenticity as something objective that experts can measure (Trilling, 1972). For example, a brand might be considered authentic because of its history or original craftsmanship. Second, the constructivist view argues that authenticity is created by consumers themselves, based on their beliefs and expectations (Wang, 1999). In this case, what feels authentic depends on how people interpret it. Third, the existentialist view is about being true to yourself (Golomb, 1995). Here, authenticity is more about inner values and consistency than outside opinions.

Morhart et al. (2015) combine these ideas and explain that brand authenticity is not fixed. Instead, it's shaped by both what brands do and how consumers perceive them. That means a company can say and do certain things, but whether it feels authentic depends on how audiences interpret those actions in context.

The building blocks of authenticity:

So, how do people decide whether a brand feels authentic or not? Bruhn, Schoenmüller, Schäfer, and Heinrich (2012) break it down into four main parts:

1. Consistency over time -the brand sticks to its values in the long-term and doesn't keep changing direction.
2. Originality -it feels creative and original.
3. Reliability - the brand keeps promises and follows through.

4. Genuineness - it feels authentic and not coerced.

If these qualities are missing, consumers often view the brand as inauthentic. Ballantyne, Warren, and Nobbs (2006) even argue that authenticity is a major part of brand image, while Kapferer (2004) says it is central to brand identity. Beverland (2005) also connects authenticity to loyalty, since people are more willing to stick with a brand they trust.

DEI and authenticity:

DEI is no longer confined to internal policies; it is increasingly reflected in how brands present themselves publicly. Some externally facing DEI strategies are inclusive marketing, supplier diversity, community engagement, and public advocacy. Because these strategies are visible, they directly affect how authentic a brand feels.

Inclusive marketing (like showing diversity in ads) links to genuineness and originality. If representation feels genuine and original, it will boost authenticity. But if it feels forced consumers see it as performative; Supplier diversity proves a brand supports fairness beyond just surface-level campaigns. But since consumers don't usually see supply chains, companies must be transparent about it. Additionally, community engagement (supporting local groups or causes) strengthens authenticity by showing the brand genuinely cares. If programs align with the brand's identity, they also support consistency. Random or one-time donations, however, may feel superficial. Public advocacy can show originality and being true to values. But it's risky. If a brand speaks up and then backs down when challenged, it looks inauthentic.

Overall, all four strategies work only if they are aligned and consistent over time. If they clash or look disconnected from the brand's core values, then they can weaken authenticity instead of strengthening it.

Lifestyle brands are specially affected by this because along with their products, lifestyle brands also sell identity. Consumers buy into the brand's values as clothing and beauty especially, is such an integral part of identity. So, DEI strategies are a direct signal of authenticity. Inconsistent DEI efforts, like one-off campaigns or token representation, can feel performative, thereby consumer damaging trust. Conversely, integrated strategies, such as inclusive marketing can reinforce the brand's identity and make consumers feel part of an authentic lifestyle. So, because these brands are tied to self-expression, DEI initiatives strongly influence perceived authenticity in lifestyle brands.

With the rise of social media, consumer judgments about authenticity are faster, louder and more public. Wang's (1999) constructivist view is especially relevant here: authenticity is constructed

by people talking together. Social platforms like Instagram, Twitter and Reddit make this process visible. People share experiences and denounce brands when they seem like they're fake.

Two things stand out:

1. Context -the same DEI strategy can be praised on one platform but criticized on another.
2. Memory -social media creates a permanent record. Past actions, old ads or past controversies are always part of the conversation, making consistency even more important.

This means lifestyle brands can't just run one inclusive campaign and move on. Authenticity builds only when DEI actions are repeated and consistent across time and platforms.

The current research makes a few things clear:

Authenticity is multi-dimensional and shaped by consumer perceptions (Trilling, 1972; Wang, 1999; Golomb, 1995; Morhart et al., 2015), brands seen as authentic are consistent, reliable and genuine (Bruhn et al., 2012). Also, authenticity strengthens brand image and identity (Ballantyne et al., 2006; Kapferer, 2004; Beverland, 2005).

But there's still a gap. Most studies focus on corporate social responsibility in general, not on DEI specifically. They don't examine how different lifestyle brands' DEI efforts affect perceived authenticity. That's where this study comes in.

By analyzing carefully selected consumer comments from social media and reviews, this research can explore how people talk about authenticity in relation to DEI. Each comment will be examined to capture context and tone, to ensure that nuanced opinions aren't overlooked. This approach aligns with Morhart et al.'s (2015) idea that authenticity is shaped by consumer perceptions, allowing a deeper understanding of how different lifestyle brands' DEI efforts influence perceived authenticity.

Conclusively, authenticity is one of the most important things consumers look for in lifestyle brands, especially in a world filled with uncertainty and over-commercialization. Externally facing DEI efforts are some of the clearest signals consumers use to judge whether a brand is authentic or not. Lifestyle brands vary widely in how they present these efforts and consumers respond differently depending on the brand's overall identity and consistency.

This study aims to fill the research gap by showing how different lifestyle brands' DEI initiatives shape perceptions of authenticity, based on real consumer reactions. By focusing on consumer

voices rather than just company claims, it highlights how authenticity is built across brands in today's socially aware marketplace.

Method

To answer the research question, qualitative text analysis of consumer comments was conducted. Comments focusing on posts related to the three campaigns were collected from social media platforms like Instagram, Reddit and YouTube. The study used theoretical sampling, deliberately selecting campaigns that represented different kinds of DEI branding: Fenty, where inclusivity was part of the brand's DNA; Nike, which blended activism with DEI; Dove, which integrated inclusivity but faced criticism due to contradictions with its parent company Unilever. A clear classification system was then applied, using the four building blocks of authenticity defined by Bruhn et al. (2012), consistency, originality, reliability, and genuineness, to design a prompt that categorized each comment as authentic, not authentic, or neutral.

To improve reliability, classifications generated by ChatGPT were manually cross-checked against the authenticity criteria to verify accuracy, particularly in comments containing irony or sarcasm, which automated systems may misinterpret.

Classification prompt used in ChatGPT:

"Classify each consumer comment about a DEI campaign as either: Authentic (if it highlights consistency, originality, reliability, or genuineness), Not Authentic (if it mentions hypocrisy, inconsistency, tokenism, or performative behavior), or Neutral (if it does not strongly express either position). Only return one of the three labels per comment. Make sure you catch tones like irony and sarcasm"

The strength of this method lies in analysing the intersection between academic theory and real consumer data. Many studies rely only on surveys or controlled experiments, but in this study, comments were pulled straight from where real people voice their unfiltered opinions. This captures sarcasm, emotional reactions and blunt criticisms, all of which are often lost in traditional research. Representative comments were chosen to illustrate each classification. This makes the findings both rigorous and grounded in real-world consumer behavior.

Authenticity was measured against a predetermined set of four building blocks (Bruhn et al., 2012):

- Consistency - staying true to values over time.
- Originality – uniqueness and creativity.

- Reliability - following through on promises.
- Genuineness - feeling natural and heartfelt.

A comment was considered authentic if it used positive language pointing to one or more of these. It was considered inauthentic if it mentioned inconsistency, unoriginality, unreliability, or performative behavior. Comments that didn't clearly fit either were marked neutral.

Results

The research question asked: *How do lifestyle brands' externally facing DEI strategies impact their perceived authenticity?* To answer this, 124 consumer comments were extracted across three campaigns. The table below shows representative comments that capture the tone of the data:

Representative consumer comments on DEI campaigns:

Campaign	Comment	Classification
Fenty Beauty	"The diversity of Fenty Beauty is unmatched... Fenty was born with us in mind whilst other brands are expanding to include us."	Authentic
	"Representation isn't just making darker colors, I think this is the best example of that."	Authentic
	"I'm genuinely not trying to hate, but I just don't get the hype... oxidizes quick... overpriced..."	Not Authentic
	"My skin is so pale it's so hard to find the right one."	Neutral
Nike	"Goosebumps! Absolutely unreal creativity. LOVE the way this has come together."	Authentic
	"It's so nice to see so many powerful women in one ad."	Authentic
	"Hey, what about those kids throwing themselves out your factories in China?"	Not Authentic
	"This commercial makes me cringe so much I have to turn the TV off."	Not Authentic
	"This shit just won an Emmy for best commercial yesterday."	Neutral
	"Thank you so much, Dove, for letting me be a part of your campaign!"	Authentic
Dove	"Glad I watched this we as women should look at ourselves as much more and more beautiful."	Authentic
	"Dove and its parent company Unilever are notorious hypocrites."	Not Authentic
	"WHERE ARE THE <u>AFRICAN-AMERICAN</u> WOMEN IN THIS VIDEO? WE ARE BEAUTIFUL TOO!"	Not Authentic
	"Auto play ads 🗨️🗨️🗨️"	Neutral

Looking at the full dataset, the numbers were:

	Authentic	Not Authentic	Neutral
Fenty Beauty	14	2	8
Nike	21	20	9
Dove	17	26	7

Case Selection Justification

1. Fenty Beauty: “Beauty for All”

Fenty is known for revolutionizing inclusivity in cosmetics with its 40-shade foundation launch. Because inclusivity was built into the brand from the start, Fenty offers a strong case for examining authenticity in DEI.

2. Nike: “You Can’t Stop Us”

Nike’s global sports ad highlighted diversity and gender equity. As Nike often mixes activism with branding, this campaign provides a chance to study how consumers judge authenticity when DEI and corporate contradictions collide.

3. Dove: “Real Beauty”

Dove’s campaign is iconic for promoting diverse beauty standards but contradictions from parent company Unilever complicate perceptions. This makes it a valuable case for exploring how corporate-level practices affect campaign-level authenticity.

Analysis

The results show clear differences between campaigns. Fenty Beauty’s “Beauty for All” was perceived as highly authentic, with most comments celebrating its inclusivity as genuine and part of the brand’s DNA, which made people trust the message and even credit it with reshaping the beauty industry. Nike’s “You Can’t Stop Us” was more divisive: the campaign’s emotional and powerful representation was praised by many, but consumer trust was split as others criticized Nike’s labour practices and labelled the ad performative, showing how authenticity weakens when brand messaging clashes with corporate behaviour. Dove’s “Real Beauty” received more criticism than praise, as while some found it inspiring, many pointed out hypocrisy due to its parent company Unilever selling skin-lightening creams and the lack of Black models in the campaign, undermining the inclusivity message.

Findings

The findings highlight that brand DNA plays a crucial role in how authenticity is perceived, as seen with Fenty Beauty, which succeeded because inclusivity was built into its identity rather than added later. Representation also emerged as a major determinant of trust, with authenticity becoming stronger when diversity is visible and sincere. However, corporate consistency is equally important, as demonstrated by Nike and Dove, where contradictions between brand messaging and corporate practices significantly weakened consumer perceptions of authenticity.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight that the success of lifestyle brands' DEI strategies depends less on the creativity of their campaigns and more on the consistency between messaging and corporate behavior. This reinforces the idea from Aaker (1999) that consumers use brands as identity markers, but they also expect consistency between what a brand says and what it does.

For Fenty Beauty, authenticity was strong because inclusivity was foundational to its brand identity. Consumers saw "Beauty for All" as a reflection of Fenty's entire business model instead of just a temporary campaign. This supports research on brand authenticity that emphasizes continuity and consistency as crucial dimensions (Beverland, 2006). Fenty's case demonstrates how DEI can be authentic when it is inseparable from the brand's DNA.

By contrast, Nike showed the double-edged nature of DEI messaging. While its "You Can't Stop Us" campaign generated emotional impact, many consumers discredited the message due to Nike's history of exploitative labor practices. This aligns with the concept of authenticity gaps (Gilmore & Pine, 2007), where strong communication fails if the brand's underlying practices contradict the message. Nike's case shows how symbolic DEI representation can be undermined by certain contradictions.

Dove sits in a middle ground. Its "Real Beauty" campaign resonated emotionally and has been celebrated for challenging narrow beauty ideals, yet skepticism about Unilever's broader portfolio weakened perceptions of authenticity. This illustrates how corporate hypocrisy undermines DEI initiatives: consumers increasingly evaluate authenticity, even at the parent-company level.

Taken together, these cases suggest that perceived authenticity in DEI branding depends on how holistic and consistent DEI efforts are, beyond just representation or message quality. For lifestyle brands, where purchases are heavily tied to identity, consumers are especially attuned to inauthenticity. This means brands cannot rely on isolated DEI campaigns to build credibility; authenticity requires long-term integration into strategy and culture.

These findings highlight that authenticity in DEI is primarily about consistency between a brand's words and actions.

Conclusion

This study examined how lifestyle brands' externally facing DEI strategies influence perceived authenticity, drawing on real consumer reactions to social media campaigns. By analyzing 124 comments across multiple platforms and classifying them against the four building blocks of authenticity: consistency, originality, reliability and genuineness, this research highlighted how consumers actively construct and judge authenticity in relation to DEI. The findings demonstrate that perceived authenticity is strongest when DEI is embedded into a brand's core identity rather than treated as a one-off marketing effort. Consistent, meaningful representation and alignment between campaign messaging and brand behavior emerged as crucial factors in building consumer trust.

For lifestyle brands seeking to foster authenticity, several practical guidelines are clear. Effective DEI efforts require more than visibility, they must be deeply embedded into the brand's identity, shaping its values in a way that feels authentic. These efforts should be maintained consistently over time and across all platforms, so consumers perceive reliability rather than fleeting gestures. DEI initiatives should also be expressed with originality and creativity, demonstrating a brand's genuine commitment to innovation. Additionally, ensuring meaningful representation is essential, so diverse experiences are reflected and finally, being transparent about limitations helps build trust as it acknowledges that progress is still ongoing.

Conversely, brands risk undermining authenticity if DEI is treated as a superficial marketing tactic, contradicted by harmful corporate practices, or presented in a way that overpromises or tokenizes certain groups. Similarly, separating DEI from the wider corporate culture or relying on one-off campaigns signals a lack of genuine commitment, which can quickly erode consumer trust. These principles highlight that authenticity is defined by the genuineness of DEI across all aspects of the brand, while the scale or creativity of individual campaigns plays a secondary role.

Overall, this research contributes to the understanding of brand authenticity by showing that consumer perceptions are shaped primarily by observable actions and experiences, while corporate statements and surveys play a more limited role. For lifestyle brands, authentic DEI engagement functions as a strategic imperative, driving consumer connection and long-term trust in an increasingly socially aware market.

References

Aaker, David A. *Managing Brand Equity: Capitalizing on the Value of a Brand Name*. Free Press, 1991.

Ballantyne, David, Ross Warren, and Karinna Nobbs. "The Evolution of Brand Choice." *Journal of Brand Management*, vol. 13, no. 4/5, 2006, pp. 339–352. DOI: 10.1057/palgrave.bm.2540276.

Beverland, Michael B. "Crafting Brand Authenticity: The Case of Luxury Wines." *Journal of Management Studies*, vol. 42, no. 5, July 2005, pp. 1003–1029. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-6486.2005.00530.x.

Bruhn, Manfred, Verena Schoenmüller, Daniela Schäfer, and Daniel Heinrich. "Brand Authenticity: Towards a Deeper Understanding of Its Conceptualization and Measurement." *Advances in Consumer Research*, vol. 40, 2012, pp. 567–576.

Gilmore, James H., and B. Joseph Pine II. *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want*. Harvard Business School Press, 2007.

Golomb, Jacob. *In Search of Authenticity: Existentialism from Kierkegaard to Camus*. Routledge, 1995.

Kapferer, Jean-Noël. *The New Strategic Brand Management: Creating and Sustaining Brand Equity Long Term*. 3rd ed., Kogan Page, 2004.

Morhart, Florian, Lorraine Malar, Anne-Marie Guèvremont, Frédéric Girardin, and Bernd H. Grohmann. "Brand Authenticity: An Integrative Framework and Measurement Scale." *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2015, pp. 200–218. DOI: 10.1016/j.jcps.2014.11.006.

Trilling, Lionel. *Sincerity and Authenticity*. Harvard University Press, 1972.

Wang, Ning. "Rethinking Authenticity in Tourism Experience." *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 26, no. 2, 1999, pp. 349–370. DOI: 10.1016/S0160-7383(98)00103-0.